NEHAD SELAIHA

EGYPTIAN THEATRE

A DIARY
1990 - 1992

To SARAH and MAYSA,
My boon companions on many a Thespian night!

EGYPTIAN THEATRE

First Edition 1993
GEBO Cairo

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Prefatory Note

This is not a book about contemporary Egyptian theatre, nor is it a chronicle of its activities in the years it covers. It is simply what it says it is – a diary.

If it can recreate for the reader, even faintly, something of the bustle and glitter of those distant and fast-fading nights, or recapture, however dimly, the warm feel of lived experience – of being in the theatre in Egypt in the 1990s – then it will have more than fulfilled its purpose.

Many of the names the reader will encounter here have never appeared in books, and the chances of their ever attaining that honour in the future seem very slim indeed. The book is in part a tribute to all those unknown and forgotten artists, in Cairo and the provinces.

My warmest thanks are due to Al-Ahram Weekly, where most of the entries here were originally published; to playwright Mohamed Salmawi, Mr Hosni Guindi, and to the bubbling and ever-youthful Dr Morsi Saad El-Din, for their consistent support and encouragement.

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To Be or Not to Be?: The Question of the 'Fringe'

Last August, when the state-sponsored Experimental Theatre Festival was abruptly cancelled on account of the Gulf crisis, a group of young theatre people met under the rallying cry: war or no war, the show must go on! The leader and agitator was journalist and actress Minha al-Batrawi who felt very angry at the high-handedness and overweening arbitrariness of the decision. 'They have no right. They consulted nobody', she bawled on the phone when she rang up to invite me to a protest and consultation meeting at the Acting Professions Guild down town. I knew how she felt; for some artists the festival is the only chance of public exposure and they work very hard for it all year, paying dearly in terms of cash and time, even though they know that they will only get a place on the outer margins.

Initially, all Minha had hoped for was to create a pressure group to persuade the Ministry of Culture to allow a *national* theatre festival to go ahead if an international one proved unfeasible or politically embarrassing. It would cost nothing, she thought; an elected voluntary committee, from amongst the artists themselves, could manage the festival and do all the work; there would be no administrative, technical or publicity costs, and no travel expenses or fat hotel bills. All

the government had to do was hand over a couple of theatres and their facilities for the duration of the festival.

At the first meeting, however, on 23rd August, things began to snowball. What Minha hadn't bargained for was the existence of a strong and militant, if politically and artistically immature, underground theatre movement: young and ardent self-supporting offshoots of the university and state regional theatres, manned by talented former students and amateurs, and lacking any legal status. They came in droves, flaunting fanciful names and clamouring for recognition and the right to participate.The word had certainly gone round: the Jugglers, the Loonies, the Visionaries, the Rebels, the Luminaries, the Sudanese Drummers, the Protesters and the Apollonians, not to mention the more sober Warsha, Movement, Encounter and Theatre Club groups - they were all there, like jinnis late loosed from their bottles!

"Where have they all sprung from?" exclaimed the distracted Minha. I must admit that I too was a little taken aback though I had known of the existence of some such troupes and had seen a few of their performance at some foreign cultural centres and at the GEBO's Book Fair the previous january. But I hadn't counted on there being so many! And such weird names!

We were no fools. Some of these flamboyant appellations, we suspected, must have been thought up on the spur of the moment; nonetheless, their overwhelming physical presence was a solid fact. There was no denying that a substantial body of theatrical talent, however amorphous and submerged, did exist outside the stuffy official establishments and needed an outlet and some form of care and nurturing. The theatrical organisation in Egypt, however, in its present condition, is not qualified to give such care. Indeed, if these incipient fringe troupes are to realise their potential and bloom into a vigorous alternative theatre, on the western model, the state will have to revise its whole policy vis-a-vis the arts and its anachronistic machinery.

It is amazing that a government which advocates a policy of general liberalization and seems all too anxious to relinquish its direct control of the economy and encourage a free market and the privatization of the public sector should prove so recalcitrant when it comes to surrendering its control of the performing arts and the mass media. In the case of the theatre, everybody, including the managers of the five

state companies and the official regional troupes, agree that what is badly needed are more state subsidies and less state control. At a recent panel discussion at the National Cultural Centre, Karam Mutawi himself, the head of the theatre sector at the Ministry of Culture, admitted that bureaucracy had overrun the theatre organization, eating up four-fifths of its five million budget and putting the proverbial spanner in the works; it had become so stultified, so antiquated, he went on to say, that the only way to deal with it was dismantle it.

Karam Mutawi seemed to be echoing what the angry young men and women of the fringe had vociferously argued for, three months ago, at that historic meeting on 23rd August. The crucial moment was deciding the name of the proposed 'non-governmental' festival: from practical considerations we slithered fast into the 'politics of theatre' and the 'philosophy' of the festival; the thorny issue of state control became the subject of a heated debate. In passionate outbursts, grievances, old and new, and bitter resentment poured out; feelings ran high, and what started as a modest peaceful project threatened to turn into open rebellion. One is tempted to go on, and give you the full inside story of that serendipitous fluke of a festival. However, this is neither the time nor place, and Minha would probably do it better than me. So, to cut a long story short, the fringe troupes won a brief victory and had their fleeting hour of glory: they christened the festival The Free Theatre Festival; drew up a manifesto and published it in the first number of the festival's bulletin; they got some attention from the media and, above all, *ten days at the Opera House* (albeit confined to the Small Hall and the Open Air Theatre only). Still quite an achievement, they being the beggars!

Compromises were inevitable; and some of them were quite absurd. The most ridiculous of all was putting the festival under the aegis of the Acting Professions Guild to escape legal prosecution and spite the Ministry of Culture into the bargain. Ironically, in ordinary circumstances, this self-same Guild would be the first to pursue, harrass and prosecute the members of these troupes for performing without a licence, and would, furthermore, deny them one if applied for on the grounds that they lack official qualifications and official sponsorship! At that moment, however (it was approaching election time), it suited the purposes of the Guild to pit itself against the Ministry, to pose as the guardian of the arts and the champion of the theatre's un-

derdogs and outcasts – or, more appropriately in this case, outlaws. Such contradictions lent the staunch anti-government defiant stand of the festival something of a Quixotic air. Those frustrated young men and women, with no money, formal training or legal protection, wanted desperately and rather pathetically to believe for one brief moment that they had finally defeated the Gorgons and were in control – the Gorgons being the bureaucrats, the Censor and the emergency laws. In fact, they had only managed to stick their tongues out at them!

It is a sad truth that in a country like ours, with no tradition of private patronage of the arts, no tax concessions to private artistic enterprises, and so many crippling laws and statutory constraints, the theatre, in any serious sense, fringe or otherwise, cannot survive without some form of enlightened state support and cooperation. The Free Theatre Festival may have been, artistically, a flash in the pan; but as a protest, a political gesture, it had far-reaching implications. Not only has it revealed the existence of an Egyptian Fringe, but also diagnosed the ailments of the current Egyptian theatre scene and tentatively suggested the cure.

Freedom, and more freedom and yet more freedom is required. And Money too, and knowledge: access to professional training courses. It is scandalous that in a country with a population of fifty million or more the only training venues for theatre artists are one theatre institute in Cairo with a very limited capacity (60 places a year), an even smaller theatre section at the university of Alexandria, and the odd workshop at the National Cultural Centre! More drama schools, workshops and performing areas are badly needed, together with a freer subsidies system on the model of the British Arts Council and *less censorship*. The alternative is a depleted, ever shrinking Egyptian theatre. More grimly, these frustrated young artists who are fighting on the side of the enlightenment may soon tire or despair and join the forces of darkness. Rather than budding artists, we could end up with a lot of bigots and fanatics on our hands.

Phantoms of Conceit: Yves Jamiaque's *Don Quixote* in Cairo

Facing the Nile across a wide busy street in south-west Cairo, stands a most inauspicious looking theatre – a very humble affair indeed, you decide when inside – what with the bare concrete floor, the hard wooden seats, the draughty auditorium and equally draughty curtainless stage, not to mention the canvas roof which boasts several gaping rents. These are, presumably, to provide natural ventilation, but have the added advantage of allowing bored spectators to amuse themselves watching the stars!

EL- Samir theatre, soon to be pulled down and, hopefully, rebuilt, is perhaps the most technically ill-equipped professional theatre in Cairo, and its acoustics are an actor's nightmare. The problem is aggravated by the lions next door. I have seen many an actor shout himself blue in the face only to have his voice drowned by their inopportune roaring. Sadly, this is unavoidable if the National Circus chooses to perform at the adjacent Balloon Theatre as it often does. Only once did the lions manifest a degree of theatrical good sense and that was during a performance of a tragic play about the legendary black folk hero, Antara. There was the mighty Antara blustering on the

stage, boasting that he was a lion-conqueror, when, suddenly, pat on time, came the roaring. The effect was shattering.

Poor and shabby, El-Samir certainly is. Whenever I hear someone advocating "the Poor Theatre", as it is fashionable to do in Cairo nowadays, I simply point out that squatty grey building and say: try to beat that. Curiously, however, it is to El-Samir that I invariably go with least dread and trepidation: what with the stars and the lions, I have rarely felt bored there. But, seriously, some of the finest and imaginative productions I have seen in Egypt in recent years were staged there, and last night's performance of Yves Jamiaque's *Don Quixote* by the Shadow Puppet-Players was fortunately of this category.

It is amazing what a talented director can do with next to no budget and a badly equipped stage if he has originality, a good text and a bunch of lively actors. Baha El-Mirghani who adapted and directed this Egyptian version of Jamiaque's play (originally translated by journalist Fathi El-Ashri) formed his troupe a few years ago in order to experiment with a new form of theatre which can incorporate the old traditional shadow and puppet show side by side with live acting. Other directors, of course, had introduced the puppet in their productions, particularly the character called 'Qaraqoz' (the Egyptian and Turkish counterpart of the English Mr. Punch). Their use of puppets, however, was more decorative than functional – a mere gesture to appease the many passionate voices clamouring for an authentic Arab theatre with a national, rather than European character, and indigenous, rather than Greek, roots.

El-Mirghani, on the other hand, believed in the poetic force of the puppet and shadow play and hoped through it to expand the visual and imaginative possibilities of the stage. The puppets in his plays were to become organic components and visual poetic metaphors. He teemed up with Said Abu Rayyah, an artist who specializes in designing and making the flat leather and cardboard puppets used in the shadow-play. Together, with some enthusiastic friends, they formed their troupe which they called 'El-Tayf Wa Al-Khayal', invoking the title of an ancient play by the medieval and, perhaps, first known Arab puppeteer, the poet Ibn Danial.

They launched themselves in a small marquee in the courtyard of the Avant-garde theatre with a short and charming shadow-puppet play, *The Crocodile of the Lake*, based on an old folk tale, and punctuated with sketches figuring the traditional Qaraqoz and a couple of human clowns. Their second experiment, *The Road to the Madhouse*, was more ambitious. It was a group adaptation of Ionesco's two Jacques plays (*Jacques or Submission* and *The Future is in Eggs*) where the role of the persecuted Jacques was alternately played by a flat shadow puppet, a hand-puppet and a real actor. Every transformation was a concrete metaphor for a state of mind or a stage in the conflict so that by the end of the play the "puppet" was poetically metamorphosed into a symbol of dehumanized humanity and a concrete indictment of political and social oppression, and bourgeois values. Significantly, Jacques' family remain shadow-puppets from beginning to end, never emerging from behind the screen as live actors.

Don Quixote is even more daring. El-Mirghani could not have chosen a better text for his mode of production. If Don Quixote, in Jamiaque's play as well as Cervantes's novel, sets out into the world to fight phantoms and windmills, what can be more appropriate than to use puppets, still and moving silhouttes, fleeting shadows and images on a screen, to body forth on the stage, "to fix in a visible home, with a frame of outward life,"in the words of Wordsworth, "some portions of those phantoms of conceit"?

The visible home, or stage, which accommodates those phantoms is divided by stage-designer Osama Abdul Tawwab into a back shadowy area and a harshly lit front by means of an enormous plywood caricature of a recumbent fire-breathing dragon. The stage-set is at once versatile and symbolic, providing several acting areas, two screens, a huge round frame for the famous windmill in the final scene, two mobile puppet-show stalls, and a big symbolic skull – obviously, Don Quixote's.

In the first part, the dividing lines between the world of phantasy and the real world of inkeepers, donkey-carters and thieves are kept fairly clear. But as the performance progresses into its second part, and with the advent of the masked actors, the transformation of the human face into puppet, shadow, mask, or other faces increases in speed and frequency, generating a spinning whirl of images that obliterates those divisions totally, and leads logically to the sad end.

This is not to say that the performance was faultless: the costumes were an improvised jumble, though the colour-matching was good; the acting, though competent on the whole and consistently lively veered at times towards the sentimental with embarrassing results; the tempo slowed down unaccountably on several occasions producing areas of boredom, especially in the first part. One could go on. Still, the overall conception proved original, daring and exciting; the shadow-puppets were exquisite in colour and design; the stage-set was effective, though poorly executed; and Mohamed Abdul Muti, in the title-role, gave an excellent performance, well thought-out and rigorously controlled. What is more, mercifully, the lions didn't roar.

El-Tali'a (Avant - garde Theatre) :
Dec. 1990.

A Lynching Party

Tucked away out of sight, behind what looks like an invincible barricade of booths, stalls, hand-carts and hawkers' trays which sell anything from footwear and hairpins to snacks and plumbing tools, the Avant-garde (Tali'a) theatre is fighting for both its breath and its audiences. The grey concrete eyesore of a multi-storey car park which towers above it grimly on one side, across a busy narrow street, may have solved a parking problem for its vehicled patrons, but it has also attracted other motorists, making the road to it virtually impassable, not to mention bursting all the pipes in the area during the laying of its foundations, which caused the theatre to shut down for months to repair its sagging floors and flooded bathrooms.

Recently, however, its repairs done, the Tali'a reopened with *The Execution of A Citizen* by a Mr. Abdul Latif Dirbala, a newcomer to the stage, though extensively published. I fought my way through the crazy traffic, the jostling crowds and the usual cacophonous din of hooting, hawking and blaring radio-cassettes to the relative quiet of the half-empty auditorium only to be startled a few minutes later by the noise of a loud and violent argument between a theatre attendant and a crowd of people intent on gaining admission.

The sound of a scuffle followed, and the "crowd" rushed in. The play had begun.

Having established with this old theatrical trick the formula of the play-within-the-play as the framework of the performance, the mock-audience proceeded to occupy the empty seats on either side of the improvised low apron stage which lay in front of the normal picture-frame one and was connected to it by a flight of steps leading up to the visible gallows. A white pulpit and a garden bench completed the set.

The first half hour of the play consisted principally of a boisterous exchange, soon developing into a slanging match, between the comic vulgar mock-audience and the florid sponsor of the show and its director (played by the real director of the play, Maher Selim, with tongue-in-cheek theatricality). It transpired that while the audience had come to watch a man hang himself as advertised, and had paid exorbitantly for it, the director wanted them to help him save the man's life as part of a new theatrical experiment in audience participation!

In the written text, the director is meant to be taken seriously, particularly his plea for an alternative theatre that discards the conventions of bourgeois drama to engage the audience in the discussion of real issues and factual situations – a plea reminiscent of the theory and practice of The Red Ladder and similar British troupes in the seventies. The text, however, was adapted for the stage by Maher Selim, and in performance, the fictional director became a comic-strip cartoon of the experimental director with a visionary head in the clouds, spouting impressive-sounding nonsense and arousing both the impatient wrath and scathing ridicule of his audience.

The director, who is, by his own admission, a failure, has pinned all his hopes on the success of this experiment, for which he has found, or, rather, stumbled upon, a willing guinea-pig in a public park: an ex-soldier who has grown sick of the world and its corruption and has decided to publicly hang himself. Well, why not? Buddhist monks have set themselves alight before in Vietnam. But Buddhist monks would never have agreed to a paying audience with tickets costing fifty pounds, as is the case here, let alone a greedy sponsor and a pretentious director. Actually, it is never made clear why the citizen agrees to the director's odd (and the sponsor's obviously mercenary) proposition. This is irritating, since he is neither a con-man after mon

ey, nor a martyr offering a sacrificial death for a definite cause which he hopes to publicize. All he wants, as he monotonously reiterates, is to be left alone to die in peace. But if peace is what he wants, why in heaven's name do it in public? And what is more, in the context of a theatrical experiment expressly designed to dissuade him from his purpose with the help of the audience?!

The mock-audience prove wisely reluctant, and we, the real audience, do not blame them, for we are equally vexed and bored by the sentimental and seemingly interminable wishy-washy ruminations of the citizen in question, and like them, are anxious for him to do it and have done. Indeed, after an hour of this, and of listening to the pleadings of a mushy wife, a sonorous preacher and a pompous smirking police officer I was quite willing to get up on the stage and hang him myself. To my immense relief, the mob lynched him just as he was about (oh my God!) to embrace life once more.

The play, after the initial half-hour which wittily burlesques modern trends in the theatre and shoots some barbed shafts at the public taste for blood and thunder in entertainment, fails to get off the ground. From the moment the long-awaited hero appears, dressed in the customary condemned-man suit, the performance slips hopelessly into the worst form of melodrama – pretentious melodrama that masquarades as something more profound.

Mr. Dirbala is a prolific writer who started on the business of playwriting late; he writes frantically as if to make up for lost time. He usually begins with interesting ideas, but in his eagerness to move on to the next play he usually botches them. It was a depressing opening for the Tali'a and has left us waiting for a more propitious come-back.

"Off, off, you lendings!": The Art of Austerity

More than twenty-five years after its first visit to Cairo with *Romeo and Juliet* (performed in the shadow of the Sphinx) the British National Theatre has made a welcome return, bringing over two of the Bard's most popular texts: *King Lear* and *Richard III*. But though they played to packed audiences at the Opera House and were generally acknowledged to be distinguished, each in its own way, the enthusiastic reception of these two fresh productions was by no means unanimous or quite unalloyed. The feverish month of frantic ticket-hunting which preceded the performance seemed to have left everybody somewhat jaded and to have built up expectations to soaring, unrealistic levels. The result after the opening night was a vague sense of letdown tinged with bafflement. The opening was *Lear*, the more popular of the two plays and the more overloaded with preconceptions.

What the audience expected to see is anybody's guess, but the combined effect of a starkly naked stage and a severely ascetic lighting-plan proved disconcerting to quite a few of its members. As the show progressed, the unrelieved emptiness became a burden on the eye and seemed to acquire a tangible oppressive presence that weighed on the mind. Gradually, as it engulfed and dwarfed the dis-

persed human figures inhabiting it, it communicated, at least to this one member of the audience, a terrible sense of desolation, and an acutely painful image of 'sad, unallied existence'. *Lear,* of course, has received in its lifetime on the stage varied interpretations, religious, political, moralistic, existentialist, absurdist and whatnot. More simply, and essentially, however, it is a play about stripping – a philosophical striptease if you like – that implacably strips human existence of all props, of all protective coats; and it is this existential striptease that Deborah Warner has daringly set out to render on the stage.

Stripped of kingdom, home, friends and family, Lear says to the naked Edgar during the storm: "Thou art the thing itself", and follows the statement by tearing off his clothes and shouting: "Off, off, you lendings! Come unbutton here." In Act V, the process of stripping is completed with the shedding off of the final garment of the flesh, heralded by the sadly ironic repetition of the same earlier request: "Undo this." It is in those lines that I think this production found its inspiration. The path of unyielding austerity it relentlessly pursues strives to give us the 'thing itself' without fineries, fripperies or trappings, and the denuded stage functions as a powerful visual metaphor for the denuded landscapes of Lear's mind. The significance of the symbolic bareness of the stage is given a wider historical application through the choice of costumes. The diversity of styles and periods there has the effect of breaking up the unity of perspective and the theatrical image into thrilling prismatic flashes in which a long buttoned Victorian overcoat can exist side by side with a medieval suit of armour. One felt as if one was watching the same drama played simultaneously at different ages, refracted in several mirrors.

The principle of austerity governing the stage-design, and the principle of diversity governing the costuming were carried over into the acting which had at times a decidedly Brechtian flavour. It was a mixture of empathy, passion, broad theatricality and humour and employed a startling rhythm of shifting moods and pitches. The general tendency, however, was to play down, undercut or explode violent emotions. The breathless tempo at which the performance moved helped in that respect, allowing neither actors nor audiences to leisurely relish or dwell sentimentally on traditionally cherished lines while giving the performance at the same time a pounding sense of urgency. There was also the added bonus of allowing this complete, uncut ver

sion of the play to materialize theatrically in the civilized space of under three and a half hours.

The startling austerity of the show apart, the real surprise for Cairene audiences was the appearance of a black Edmund. Obviously intended to embody into the play the theme of black marginalization in Western societies and justify Edmund's venality in modern terms, it looked somewhat too simplistic, propagandist and artificially contrived. Those fortunate members of the audience who had had the chance to see Deborah's 1985 production of *Lear* missed her earlier crippled Fool and his doubling as Cordelia. The connection between the two characters, however, was firmly established here as Lear coupled his words over the corpse of Cordelia with the gesture of planting on her nose the artificial red nose of the dead Fool.

It would be redundant to praise the actors here; they have already received rave reviews and international adulation on this tour. I would only venture to say that in a production of this type, i.e. a director's production where the overall picture is more important that the parts, there can be no individual outstanding actors; there can only by outstanding ensemble acting and that we got in this haunting if perturbing production.

Richard III was much more accessible and therefore more universally applauded. Given a modern political context in which Richard's crooked and ruthless rise to power is reflected in the mirror of Hitler, the production gave ample scope to designer Bob Crowley to create impressive and more visually varied sets. High grey walls boxed in the characters on three sides, creating a gruesome cell-like interior, while a single door at the back cast a harsh glaring light onto the floor of the stage, highlighting the approaching steps and endowing them with a menacing resonance. There the darkly clad bodies melted into the shadows, while the rigidly symmetrical rows of austere metal-capped lamps vividly evoked the atmosphere of investigation rooms and the horrors of living in a police state. In the coronation scene, this grey severity gives way to brash and gaudy opulence with a high throne, a symbolic painted backdrop and an over abundance of red carpets. Painted scenery is used again in the final battle scene in Bosworth field with an enormous red tent for the tyrant. For the public speeches and orations of the Richard/Hitler hero, a mobile stand is provided to project him right into the middle of the stage, high above the actors' heads.

The overall style of the production flirted with the documentary. With the movement reduced to the barest minimum and slowed down, the scenes followed each other like a series of still frames. I felt as if I was flipping through the pages of an old album of faded but still very potent photographs. Ian Mckellen's portrayal of this demonic character was unique and certainly a triumph. Ascetically waving aside the many enticing opportunities for facile humour and easy laughs, he infused a sense of terrible austerity and lethal seriousness into his rendering of the part. This made him at once more credible and more chillingly nearer home. When at the end he breaks out into a loud, vociferous, frenzied speech, gradually losing coherence and dissolving into a series of canine yaps, yelps, and barks, the effect is stunning.

Back in the sixties the British theatre strove for a fresh response, for vitality, relevance, textual care and theatrical totality. It seems that the quest is still on.

Old Wine in New Bottles

For the opening of its much delayed winter season, The National Theatre chose *al-Zir Salim*, a play of the sixties, the so-called golden age of Egyptian drama, by the prominent Egyptian playwright Alfred Farag. Farag had won popular acclaim and critical esteem with a series of plays that proved his technical virtuosity and progressive views before he voluntarily exiled himself after a series of political victimizations and harassments including a four-year prison term. He spent some years in Algeria then settled down in London. Luckily, however, he is now back in Egypt for a long stay.

Farag is particularly know for his many incursions into the world of folk literature and his tapping of traditional sources. In three of his plays he uses ancient and modern history (*The Fall of a Pharoah,* 1957, *Sulayman of Aleppo,* 1965, and *Fire and the Olive Branch*, 1970), and in four (*The Barber of Baghdad,* 1964, *al- Zir Salim*, 1967, *Ali Janah al-Tabrizi and his Servant Quffa,* 1968, *and Epistles of the Judge of Seville,* 1978) he draws upon popular narratives such as oral tales, *The Arabian Nights*, the *Belles Lettres* of the great Abbasid writer al-Jahiz, and the folk epic about the life and exploits of al-Zir Sa-

lim, prince, poet, butcher, mad idealist and debauched womanizer, to name but some of his facets.

Farag's attitude to tradition, however, is far from acquiescent; it is one of deep and searching critical questioning rather than complacent endorsement, "one," as he puts it, "which aims at reshaping life via the reshaping of tradition." This attitude informs *al-Zir Salim* and is translated into a dramatic structure where the tragic history of Salim and the turbulent past of bloody strife and inter-tribal feuds, of bigotry and intolerance masquerading as idealistic moral quests, is conjured up, with all its primitive savage passions, and subjected to the cool and honest gaze of reason.

The past, spanning 17 years, unrolls in the play in quick short scenes, unfolding a series of related revenge schemes with enough corpses to satisfy the most bloody-minded and sensationalist Elizabethan writer. This gory drama is presented not as a flashback or a haunting memory, but as a conscious reenactment of the past, by the people who bore its brunt, in response to the urgent inquiries of long-absent Hagras. Hagras, the lawful heir to the throne of the Arabs and the symbol of a new rational and enlightened order, plays the role of a Brechtian chorus and represents at once the author and the audience on the stage. Significantly, he was brought up far away at the top of a mountain where he learnt wisdom in the court, and at the hands of a prince by the name of Munjid, in Arabic, 'the rescuer' or 'the giver of succour'.

The play begins with the rejection of tradition rendered as Hagras's refusal to accept his inheritance and mount the bloody throne which has caused the violent death of so many of his kinsmen, and ends with his acceptance of the burden of rule, in a spirit of near martyrdom, in order to guide his people to reason, peace and unity. And between the beginning and the end history is replayed, as a play-within-the-play, and is revealed as a shambles. The drama of the past which forms the tragic core of the play, with Salim as tragic hero, carries strong verbal and formal echoes from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Electra*, and *Antigone*, as if to generalize it into the sphere of all tragedy, and is framed and regulated by the carefully orchestrated transitions from the past to the present, and from emotive acting to epic questioning and comment. The result is that we are never allowed to enter completely into the spirit of tragedy and are forced to maintain, as it were, a dou

ble perspective, or rather, our distance from the events to examine them thoughtfully.

Anyone familiar with the work of Alfred Farag cannot fail to realize his indebtedness to the epic theatre of Brecht. In this play, however, the most Brechtian of all, he managed to indulge his love for Shakespeare and the Greeks, and their rare fusion of poetry and brutality, without sacrificing his progressive anti-tragic leftist stance. He skilfully manages the transition from Shakespeare and the Greeks to Brecht so that the interplay of tragic and epic scenes serves to underscore and enhance the passion and poetry of the one and the rationality and historical sense of the other - a delicate balance which Brecht himself strove for and at his best attained.

This delicate balance makes the play one of the most tasking in production. I have seen it twice performed this year in the provinces and experienced the agony of watching it disintegrate and splinter into incoherent fragments with violent irreconcilable changes of mood and message. Both times I had the impression that I was watching two unrelated plays: one cloyingly tragic and heavily derivative, with the ranting hero Salim demanding his murdered brother back alive and slaughtering thousands in the name of justice, and the other, ponderously and dryly didactic, with Hagras assuming the boring role of preacher. The final effect was of a text with a crack in the middle that cried out for cohesion - a text that strove for the epic and the tragic but made a travesty of both.

In the present National Theatre production, however, veteran director Hamdi Ghayth, finally dredging himself out of a long despondency, adroitly avoids that pitfall, and achieves coherence of tone and mood and formal integrity - the perfect blend of thought and feeling. The rapid flow of the scenes, their strong visual impact heightened by the sets and costumes of Mona Badrawi, and the sensitive shifts of rhythm, the compactness, precision and severe economy of the movement, together with good acting from a harmonious ensemble and effective, unobtrusive lighting, made the show a real treat. It seems that in drama, as in wine, ripeness is all.

A French Spell

With the memories of two magnificent British productions of Lear and *Richard III* still green, the Egyptian theatre has suddenly decided to go French for a spell with three modern French plays opening simultaneously last week. Curiously, the world of Ionesco's *Les Chaises (The Chairs)* at el-Salam Theatre, of Genet's *Les Bonnes (The Maids)* and François Tesandier's *Le Temps de Solitude (Time of Loneliness)* - both at the Youth Chamber Theatre - though far removed in time from *Lear's* seems to partake of the same quality of existential absurdity. Lear's 'poor, bare, forked animal' strikes me as the grand ancestor of Genet's 'humiliated creatures, crawling on their bellies', as he described his favoured characters in his *Thief's Journal (Journal du Voleur)*, and the sense of arid loneliness and frustration which obsesses the couples in Ionesco's and Tesandier's texts is not alien to Lear's empty grey wastes.

Ionesco's *Chairs* received its Egyptian premiere in the sixties, the heyday of experimental drama in Egypt; together with Beckett's *Endgame* it made the Pocket Theatre famous (before it burned down) and initiated a fashion for absurd drama that has proved deeply influential. In the following decades, although Brecht's epic theatre gradually

overshadowed and for a while totally eclipsed the absurd, Ionesco's plays have retained their popularity, especially among students and young people and are frequently revived by professional and amateur troupes. This latest matinee production of *The Chairs* was sponsored by the experimental branch of the Modern Theatre Company and ostensibly carries the mark and air of youthful high spirits. The acting, decidedly Chaplinesque in style and tempo, was superb. My perennial apprehension at the prospect of watching young people undertake the parts of older folk was for once unsubstantiated. Ghada Sulayman and Ayman Ahmad, both drama students, with the help of director Mohamed Disouki who makes his debut with this production, manage to strike a delicate balance between pathos and broad farce. They preserve the mellow sadness and lyrical potency of the text while splitting our sides with laughter as they frenziedly clamber up and down chairs, occasionally crawling underneath them to converse with an imaginary host of guests made up of giants and midgets. The set, imaginatively designed by Hisham Goma, is a simple geometrical arrangement of square and rectangular grey panels which swivel to reveal chairs hooked up to heir backs or parts of an enormous painted brain and two split faces. The highlight of the performance was as usual the chair-fetching sequence: they were brought in singly at first, then in large mumbers, piled up on moving tiers, feverishly trundled in to the swelling strains of Khatchaturian's Sabre Dance, to form finally a veritable pyramid with the orator's stand towering above the uppermost tier at the back .

As we cross over from El-Salam to the Youth Chamber Theatre we find ourselves still inhabiting the same world of fantasy, illusion, unfulfilled dreams and undelivered messages. The atmosphere in this small theatre, however, is heavier, smouldering with suppressed passions and charged with ritual and sado-masochistic eroticism. Genet's *Maids*, though widely known in Egypt, was thought even in the permissive sixties to be too daring and was duly withheld from public performance until now – a fact which makes the current performance in these days of religious fundamentalism something of a theatrical event.

Asim Ra'fat, one of a promising crop of young Egyptian directors, chose for the play a bare square acting area surrounded by the audience on all sides with a sloping gangway at one corner for entrances and exits. For props he used only a tomb-like divan which

splits at moments lengthwise into three versatile parts, and a compact flat wooden shape, faintly suggestive of a scarecrow and representing at once a dressing table with mirror, a telephone stand, a wardrobe piled up with garments and a curtained window. This condensation of symbols in one compound unit helped him to economize in the use of space and saved the performance a lot of cluttering. He dressed his three actresses - an amateur, a drama student and a professional - in skin-tight black leotards and African waistbands with multicoloured strips presumably to accentuate the primitivism of the sympathetic-magic acting-ritual performed by the two maids.

Genet had intended an all-male cast for this play to double the fantasy and indicated that even if the parts were assumed by actresses the performance should incorporate a suggestion of males masquerading as females. This instruction was, unfortunately, observerd only fitfully in this production but the incantatory, declamatory delivery, also insisted upon by Genet for purposes of distantiation, was successfully realized in the ritualistic impersonation scenes. Besides, the two contrasting modes of verbal and physical expression adopted - one formal, stylized and expressionistic, the other earthy and naturalistic - helped to focus the transition from the world of reality to the world of illusions. A string of primitive beads round Claire's neck which became a headband everytime she impersonated her mistress also marked the transition, infusing it with a sense of primitive magic. This brief and enjoyable sojourn in Genet's world of neurosis and compulsive obsessions was marred, however, by some occasional and embarrassing emotional over-indulgences and by the intrusion of a sentimental political song which bracketed the performance simplifying its message into mere facile social protest.

The second part of this French evening at the Chamber was bedevilled by a similar sentimental framing song and suffered in general a much worse fate. Tesandier's lyrical, elusive and humourous text about an encounter between two lonely strangers on a park bench at night - strongly reminiscent of Albee's *Zoo Story* - was clumsily transferred to the stage with laboured acting and weird costumes. Expressionism played havoc with the production, burying its subtle ironies under thick discordant layers of mime, choreographed sequences and elaborate stylized movement and gesture. The result was a baffling hour that left the theatre nearly empty half-way through and bored the few remaining stubborn spectators who bore it till the end.

Sinbad the Sailor . . .
Strung up by the Ankle!

Five years ago, after a chequered career as director, directing mostly his own plays, Rafat EL-Dweri was nominated for the most-promising-dramatist-of-the-year annual state award. *Cat With Seven Lives* (available in English) which won him the nomination is typical of his distinctive experimental mode of dramatic composition. Rejecting realism and the well-made play, Dweri, after a few forays into expressionism, has consciously and studiously developed a type of drama that is at once undisguisedly theatrical (he has constant recourse to the play-within-the -play formula) and firmly rooted in the Egyptian popular tradition. In play after play we find him increasingly drawing on myth, fable and folklore, reverting time and again to the consecrated themes of fertility, death and resurrection with their associated complex and time-hallowed rituals. In *Cat With Seven Lives*, for instance, he sets a Pharaonic mystery play - a sacred ritualistic drama about Osiris, the god of fertility – at the heart of a contemporary peasant drama of everyday life and concerns. In an earlier play, *The Shrewd Knave (El-Fahlawan)*, he sought inspiration in the Arabic "Maqama"- an old literary form of short prose narrative regarded by some as the precursor of the Western shortstory. From collections of

such stories (by El-Hariri and El-Hamazani) he drew themes, characters, atmosphere and language and hosted them in a theatrical form modelled on the episodic and rambling structure of the "Maqamat" creating what might be called a picaresque play in which ritual and ceremony mingle with various native forms of popoular entertainment. There, the seemingly random succession of scenes and episodes is given shape by the clown-cum-picaro hero. When Mr. Dweri reworked the play a few years. later, he added to its already dizzying array of rogues and witches, story-tellers and strolling actors, street dancers, acrobats and jugglers, a colourful pharaonic pageant – a testimony to the openness and versatility of the form.

Dweri's latest venture, *Strung up by the Ankle,* which he, true to his customary practice, has himself recently directed for the Avant–garde Theatre, is not so much a mining of the same vein as an attempt to integrate his earlier expressionistic techniques with the picaresque form of play he developed later. Invoking another old popular literary source, the famous *Arabian Nights,* he fishes out the character of Sinbad the Sailor and casts him, in jeans and a blue shirt, at the mouth of a cave, at once suggestive of a bird of prey and a womb. The scene is a rocky shore whose sole inhabitants are an old, ugly and sexually rapacious witch, a handful of guards and ghosts (masked dancers), and a crippled figure from the distant past of the tales, complete with beard and turban. This figure, who is saddled with a grotesque inflated rubber doll resembling the witch, is, presumably, the old doppelganger of the modern Sinbad, and a young woman, who is added later on, completes the cast.

The huge and menacing rock formations, executed in shades of brown and copper against a blue and green back-drop for sea and sky, lend the stage an eerie and desolate atmosphere and become positively frightening as they start to close in on the hero or as they interlock to form a massive mountain. At certain points these mobile structures vanish into the wings and flies clearing the stage for symbolic airy ballet sequences or for a surrealistically rendered space-ship scene with dancing crows, a high spiral metal ladder and weird lighting.

A swivel chair (the witch's throne) occupies the mouth of the cave with a mask of Sinbad's face conspicuous on its back, while the prow of Sinbad's wrecked vessel with his famous telescope mounted on it is visible at intervals on the left.

The play unfolds in a series of evocative if sometimes baffling images that seem to rise, merge, separate, divide and proliferate in a dream-like manner. They take us on a nightmarish voyage into the mind of Sinbad who is revealed as the prototype of man seeking his salvation and torn between his half-dust and half-deity sides, between the spirit and the flesh, and all it is heir to, in Hamlet's words, or to use Freudian jargon, between his dark Id and Super-ego. In a vivid scene, this conflict is rendered visually as Sinbad gets caught in a fierce tug-of-war between the young woman at the top of the mountain who tries to pull him up, and the old witch at its foot straining to pull him down. Sinbad continues to vacillate between the two extremes until he finally succeeds in recreating himself in a ritualistic birth-scene in which the young woman plays midwife amidst the hero's shrieks and groans, and a coiled rope represents the new self, born out of the old.

After a brief relapse, Sinbad triumphs over the witch, forcing her to strip off her masks, which she does in a grotesque striptease dance. Finally, dark and naked (in a black leotard) she reveals her face: it is (surprise!) Sinbad's. At this moment, whether for symbolic reasons, or due to shock, Sinbad's old double drops off dead, dropping his doll, and is dragged off stage by the unmasked witch, now wearing the mask of Sinbad. The play ends with an ironic twist when the young woman, Sinbad's spiritual guide, suddenly slips into the part of the witch, lulling him to sleep with a bed-time story only to tie him up with the same rope that had earlier ominously represented his newly born self. She slips off stage holding the end of the tope, leaving him in a forest of masks of his own face.

Visually a treat, with its exciting proliferation of masks, its imaginative costumes, and its harmonious blend of colour, lighting and movement configurations, the performance nevertheless suffers from a verbal over-bloating in parts and general symbolic flatulence; to the symbols already mentioned you may add the Hanged Man's card in fortune-telling packs which gives the play its title, and that of the drowned Phoenician sailor, obliquely referred to, which evokes in turn "Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante" in Eliot's *Waste Land*. The acting, however, more than made up for these flaws with master performances from the versatile Abdul Rahman Abu Zahra as Sinbad and Awatif Hilmi as the witch, played with impressive gusto and well-studied grotesquerie.

Variations on a Quixotic Theme

That five recent productions in succession have invoked the figure of Don Quixote must surely count as an obsession, given that this is no centennial year, and Egyptian directors had previously exhibited little, if any, interest in either Cervantes or his great creation. Yet suddenly we find Don Quixote projected as a prototype for the modern Arab intellecutal on almost every stage in town. What, one wonders, is the basis for this newfound interest?

A strong clue lies in the title of the first of the Spanish hero's emanations on the Cairene stage. For *The Travels of Don Quixote in the Lands of the Babbling Idiots*, produced by an experimental theatre troupe from Port Said, pulled no punches and happily identified the lands of the title as the Arab world. Nor could contemporary events have more clearly underlined the message of the play.

The Travels could not have come at a better time. Coinciding with Saddam's invasion of Kuwait it seemed bitterly prophetic - a cautionary tale whose bleak humour and occasional degeneration into farce foretold much of the muddled thinking, mule-headedness and blundering that preceeded and has since bedevilled the tragic events in

the Gulf. And the style of the production seemed designed to enhance its sour message. Abandoning modern technology, including electricity - a rejection perhaps of Western values - it relied instead on primitive lanterns, simple handmade props and cardboard loudspeakers. The open air stage at the Cairo Opera House was left completely bare except for a few scattered wooden blocks, four thin poles sporting paper windmills, and a series of masks dangling from washing lines suspended overhead.

The performance proceeded, literally in flashes, as the actors darted about the stage with their lanterns, knocking each other down as they fought to mount and dismount the blocks, getting hopelessly tangled in the net of washing lines. And the whole scene was performed to a chorus of nonsense as the doublespeak of political rhetoric boomed through the loudspeakers, enveloping and informing the chaos with its fatal brand of illogic.

No sooner had this first encounter with Don Quixote ended than the El-Samir Theatre introduced their version - translated into Arabic by Fathi AL-Ashri - of Yves Jamiaque's play *Don Quixote*. Utilising traditional forms, including masks and puppetry, director Bahaa El-Mirghani sought to place Cervantes's bathetic fable within the tradition of Arab theatre. And both puppet and shadow shows served their purpose admirably, heightening the fantastic elements of the tale whilst underlining its relevance and adaptability to traditional forms.

Two Quixotes seemed sufficient, and seeking a change I went to watch the sensational exploits of vengeful folk hero Al-Zir Salem at The National. Yet halfway through the performance the hero interrupted his mad and bloody quest for absolute justice to sit astride a wooden horse and brandish an imaginary sword. And lo! from the wings Sancho Panza emerged to recite the adventures of his master.

He was everywhere.

What, I thought, could be safer than *What's the Score*, a political parable set on the football field. A biblical Job was team captain, God the referee. But soon, beneath tracksuits and shorts, could be heard the creaking of rusty armour. And by the end of this absurdist fable Job, like Quixote, found himself misplaced in time, a defeated prisoner of conscience, trapped in a cell with God, Satan and the United States all in league against him.

War had now broken out. In search of relief I went to the government-sponsored Comedy Theatre. Here at last I felt safe. But *Monkey No See*, billed as an innocent bag of laughs, quickly slid into Quixotic fantasy, and began to flirt dangerously with politics. Apprehension turned into open dismay as the play took a sudden and startling dip into the tragic as the journalist hero – the monkey of the title – was struck deaf and blind. Once again we were plunged into Cervantes's dangerous world of illogic. But before being silenced the journalist hero was able to give voice to the question that had lurked, unspoken, behind each of Don Quixote's appearances. Where, he begs of the audience, are we heading? But the question was rhetorical, since five plays had exposed the absurdity of the situation. For where, in this world of Cervantean illogic, can we be heading, if not towards disaster.

The National Upstairs :
1st Mar. 1991

Exiles and Kings

I suffer from a congenital aversion to mono- and melo-drama. Still, I have just spent a decent hour and a half at the new experimental unit of The National watching *The Price of Exile*. Actress Madiha Hamdi took us on single-handed in this one-woman tear-jerker and worked wonders with a timid script from Laila Basit and pallid direction from Zoser Marzouq.

For a more intricate, robust and vivacious show I intend to visit El-Salam Theatre where The Modern Theatre Troupe is reviving for the third time in two years its musical hit *The King* is *The King*. In this revival Ahmad Bedeir and Tawfiq Abdul Hamid star in the leading roles of king and Royal Doppelganger. The change may not prove altogether for the better in the case of Bedeir, despite his immense popularity, but Abdul Hamid's king may gain in tragic force and depth. The delightful Mohamed Moneir will still be there, leading the tune, and hopefully the visual impact may remain as strong as ever.

Ramadan Fare

Ramadan, the month of fasting, promises a theatrical glut of revivals. On the menu are two productions by brilliant Samir El-Asfouri, *Cairo' 80*, an adaptation of Naguib Mahfooz's novel *The Day the President Was Assassinated,* and *Honey is Honey,* a political musical based on poems in the vernacular by the famous poet and satirist Bayram al-Tunsi. The two are quite enjoyable though the former might prove too heavy after a long day's fast; the latter is light and frothy but marred by excessive length. *The Dowry,* another musical starring Midhat Salih, can be a very decent course if the actors do not overdo the ad-libbing and the saucy jokes. The sweet and sour *Down the Drain* by Mohamed Salmawi is being contemplated, and an evening of poetry collated from the works of Farouk Guweida and given dramatic form by director Karam Mutawi promises to be a light and invigorating item.

The National:
7th Mar. 1991

Blissful Innocents

Back in' 63, the Egyptian National Theatre staged *Macbeth* in Arabic. Then, the strident ranting and loud declamation of veteran classical actor Hamdi Ghayth was toned down and leavened by a vibrant and highly-strung performance from Sanaa Gamil as his slightly neurotic lady. Recently, another Ghayth(younger brother Abdallah) has taken on the role, and in the same arena.With more than twenty-seven years separating the two productions, one expected a change and foolishly hoped for something better.

But old habits die hard, especially at the National; the out-dated, exaggerated and deadeningly respectful view of Shakespeare is still very much alive there. Even the same translation was used with its stilted, overblown and heavily ornate Arabic. True, director Shakir Abdel-Latif smoothed it over in places and replaced some of the more unwieldy passages with others from a more recent translation, but the language remained obdurate, forming an impenetrable barrier between the actors and their characters on the one hand, and the actors and the audience on the other. As they choked on the words, spluttering them at us like hard pellets that bruised our ears, all the sensitive rhythms,

the subtle nuances and the psychological complexity of the play were hopelessly shattered.

No wonder Fardous Abdel-Hamid completely missed the point about Lady Macbeth, rendering her as a cool, calculating hardened criminal and thoroughbred Amazon. When she receives her hubby's letter about the witches, she stalks about the room in thick loud heels, in a severe black dress edged with gold, and puts as much excitement into her reading as one would put into the reading of a grocery bill. When the breathless husband dashes in she greets him with a matronly smile and an icy pat on the shoulder. In Shakespeare's original, the scene bristles with sexual imagery (crown, dagger, blood, milk and nipples, not to mention "The serpent underneath the tree"); it literally seethes with passion and recreates for us Adam's seduction by Eve. But here, Miss Abdel-Hamid and Mr Ghayth Jr. bluntly set about bleeding it dry, and, blissfully innocent of any knowledge of the text, they give us one theatrical cliché after another, robustly covering the whole catalogue of classical *tableaux* and poses.

In the following scenes, Miss Abdel-Hamid keeps up the same stolid front without the slightest hint of any internal turbulence – not a tremor, not a single perturbed look, a furtive clenching of a fist, or a sudden tightening of a muscle. No wonder that when she finally bursts upon us in the sleep-walking scene, in a white nightgown this time, writhing with remorse, she is only recognizable as the same woman by her shoes.

Mr Ghayth displays a different mask, but is equally mulish in sticking to it; he twists up his face in one huge snarl from beginning to end, and how a man with a face like that can ever have had one drop of the milk of human kindness quite beats me. The character whose real tragedy consists essentially in betraying himself, and whose crimes are ultimately acts of self-destruction on the symbolic and psychological level, is here transformed into a demented melodramatic tyrant and a swaggering thug.

The timing of the production may explain this odd and incredibly naive portrayal of Macbeth. A parody of Saddam Hussein was clearly intended with Scotland as a metaphor for the Arab world. This comes across very clearly when Ahmed Abdel-Halim as Macduff delivers the moving elegy on Scotland with the deep sorrow and touching grief of

a man who has lived in Kuwait for 15 years and watched it ransacked by a tyrant.

The production tried hard to make up visually for the loss of poetry and good acting, with good sets and lighting and two cabalistic orgiastic dances from Ismat Yahya's ballet troupe in the witches scenes. Nevertheless, the sets, however beautiful, remained empty frames, and the dances, though daring in their obvious sexual implications, failed to mesh in with the acting or to suggest the right atmosphere. The electronic incidental music too, though adequate for a proper interpretation of the play, clashed here with the grandiloquent style of delivery with ridiculously discordant effects. On the whole, it was a museum piece of classical provenance, straining hard for political relevance and immediacy with little success. Sitting through the show I clearly understood what Peter Brook meant by 'deadly theatre.'

The Opera (Small Hall):
7th Mar. 1991

Pot-bellied Dayer

I shall be there watching Dayer for the fourth time. I can never resist that round, pot-bellied, smelly king and his marionette-like wife and entourage whenever and wherever he hits town. And this time he has decided to clown away his anti-heroic saga at the little theatre of the Cairo Opera House and shock everybody to the roots of their hair.

This Thursday, *Mr. Dayer Goes Round*, or *The Merry Go Round,* opens with the same competent and versatile cast, and hopefully, the same magical impact. Director Hasan El-Gretly, founder of the madly inspired and recklessly innovative Warsha (Workshop) troupe, usually provides a synopsis of the performance in English for non-Arabic-speaking members of the audience. But those who know their Alfred Jarry well and his *Ubu* dramatic quartet won't need it. Jarry' s grotesque world remains recognizable in El-Gretly's comic *tour de force* of an adaptation, even though it is given a local habitation in the Memluki era and historical names.

The production uses make-up masks, weird hairdo's and zany costumes and many forms of the shadow-show to create a stunning visual and imaginatively haunting effect. A political message is, as

usual, inevitable. But it is delivered in an artistically sophisticated and light-hearted fashion.

Lear in Motley

While actor Abdullah Ghayth nightly struts and frets his two-solid-hour performance as Macbeth upon the stage of the National, right behind his back, at the audacious little Avant-garde theatre (the backyard of the National), *King Lear* is busy making even more of a fool of himself than his creator intended him to be. The venerable old king is assiduously abetted by a group of impish young actors and a notoriously irreverent director.

Mohamed Abdul Hadi who three years ago gave us a haunting version of Peter Weiss's *Marat/sade* is as wayward as ever. In that earlier production he had cancelled the auditorium of El-Salam theatre, made us sit with the actors on the stage in a circle, in semi-darkness, round a grim-looking guillotine (more like a chopping-block), and insisted that we wear the straitjackets he had provided. This time, he has shifted his grounds to the auditorium – masked actors and all – and burlesque is the order of the day . Unless one is squeamish about seeing the farcical side of things, or as good old Lord Byron put it, seeing things in the absurd point of view, one is bound to spend a pleasant evening.

A forthcoming treat is Abla Kamel's repeat of her one-woman theatrical *tour de force Waking Up, at the* Small Hall of the Opera House. The production, based on Minha al-Batrawi's translation of Dario Fo's and Franka Rama's play, and sensitively directed by Hasan El-Gretly, inaugurated the activities of Al-Warsha troupe and is still one of the best items in their repertory.

El-Salam Theatre,
14th Mar. 1991

The King Is the King, or A Visor for a Visor

In the old Chinese tale the emperor is wheedled by his tailor into parading the streets in nothing 'but vain fantasy' and the sumptuous fabrics of the imagination. That emperor did not know how lucky he was to have remained recognizable as such without the outward shows of power; when a child cried out: "The emperor has no clothes!" he was deeply chagrined and scurried home naked, but he was still an emperor.

Such an incident, however embarrassing, would have been the salvation of the unfortunate king in Sa'dallah Wannus's masterpiece *The King is the King* (now at el-Salam theatre); but no such luck. His clothes are all too real and when he slips them off for a whim, he tragically discovers that a king is nothing but a theatrical fabrication, a visor that has no visage beneath. Wannus borrows a tale from the *Arabian Nights* to argue, most delightfully, that none is born royal, that no emperor is recognizable without his props and trappings, and that royalty is an elaborately staged masque.

In the Arabian tale, the king, in the habit of wandering among his people in disguise when bored, seeks to amuse himself further by playing a practical joke on a ruined merchant who is given to con-

soling himself with fanciful visions of power and glory. (Wannus gives him a further trait: he makes him an alcoholic with an extremely hazy sense of identity.) Having doused his victim with wine, the king carries him senseless to his palace, decks him out in royal robes and places him on the royal bed. The beggar will be king for one day. The Arabian tale ends happily: the king has his sport and the beggar, who is pushed to near insanity, is richly rewarded. In the play, however, the joke is cruelly turned upon the king, and the engineer is hoist with his own petard.

The mock rituals of coronation (translated in the production into the rituals of the 'subu', a celebration marking the first week of a baby's life) announce the beginning of the nightmare and also the second part of the show. The king who, unlike his Arabian prototype, had not taken his court into his confidence (to laugh at their bewilderment when they spot the change) watches with dazed incredulous eyes his theatrical illusion magically usurping his crown, queen and courtiers and even his vizier who was in on the hoax. His hopes momentarily revive when the wife and daughter of the fabricated king arrive to seek justice at the court but are promptly dashed when the man and his family fail to recognise each other. As the real king's identity gradually pales out into his merchant disguise, his mind gives way, and the latent irony of the title bursts upon us with full force. The king, after all, is and, paradoxically, is not the king.

This paradox is built into the structure of the play with two parallel and contrasting parts, each dramatising one interpretation of the title. A Brechtian chorus is also provided to question and comment, expanding the political significance of the paradox and relating costume to class distinction.

In the printed text Wannus, who has a very powerful theatrical sense, insists in the stage directions on the use of ritual, stylised gesture, and a symbolic setting with a spiral throne. The royal costume too comes in for a lot of attention; it should be unnaturally voluminous. Director Murad Munir makes very few changes in this visual conception and adds a few brilliant and inspired touches. Most remarkable, perhaps, are the exorcism ritual of the 'zar' which opens the play with a prophecy of the exit of one king, and the parallel 'subu' ritual, which announces the arrival of another. There is also the visually potent royal tent, topped with a huge crown, which symbolically

moves in Part Two from the right to the centre of the stage indicating a political shift from monarchies to liberal democracies and condemning both (Wannus is a leftist). The tent finally acquires a life of its own; in the last scene it heaves and contracts like a huge bloody womb, expanding all the time, and then advances mechanically, hugging the throne, to ruthlessly crush the rebellious chorus. In this impressive theatrical gesture Munir sums up visually the message of the play. His major contribution, however, was making the play into a quasi-musical; politically explosive lyrics were given to the chorus with popular singer Mohamed Munir in the lead. Mohamed Munir is of course the star attraction and his presence in the show accounts for a substantial portion of the audience, especially young people. But he is one in a starstudded cast: the magnificent Tawfik Abdel-Hamid and famous comedian Ahmed Bedir lead as the two kings, while the beautiful Fayza Kamal and vivacious Hayat Al-Sheemi double as members of the chorus and the false king's wife and daughter. Lutfi Labib also bubbles with humour and mischief nightly, giving a zany performance as the servant and the artificial vizier. With a cast like this and an excellent text and production, no wonder the extremely rare 'full-house' sign is currently a fixed feature of the box-office at el-Salam theatre.

Here and There

The management of El-Samir theatre in Agouza seem to have finally had enough of the roaring lions of the National Circus next door. Recently, they have staged a production sporting the title *Beasts Don't Sing*! How true!

The play, by prominent Syrian poet and playwright Mamdouh Udwan, is receiving its Egyptian premiere in a modified colloquial version at the hands of director Samir Husni. A pleasant evening if one does not mind the hard wooden seats of Al-Samir or the natural ventilation provided by the rents in its canvas roof.

It was more intimate and cosier at the Youth Chamber theatre where singer Azza Balba is nightly proving her acting prowess in a revival of her last year's triumph *If Only!* It is a musical political monodrama about a female rebel forcibly put away as a lunatic. The story unfolds in a series of flashbacks, songs, and imaginary sessions with an invisible psychiatrist. The direction is uncluttered and effective and the music is good.

El-Tali'a, (Avant-garde theatre):
21st Mar. 1991

Lear: A Harlequinade !

Irreverently billed as a farcical parody, the Avant-garde theatre's recent production of *King Lear* (the first in Egypt since George Abyad's rumbling performance in 1927) has turned out to be, in a very original sense, quite "the real thing." I do not remember when I was so moved, though I saw the great Olivier in the part, by the blunders and tribulations of this cantankerous doddering fool and his pathetically funny ramblings. Indeed, only a genius, or a lunatic, would pick out such an irascible senile character for a tragic hero (a man well into his second childishness ... *sans* teeth *sans* eyes, *sans* taste, *sans* everything, as Jacques would say), make him behave like a spoilt brat in the first scene, then set him at the height of his tragedy prancing about half-naked in the rain in the company of a dithering fool and a raving maniac ! But that is exactly what Shakespeare does in *Lear*. And he gets away with it. Out of the very stuff of the rough and tumble popular comedy of his day, the traditional patter and conventional routines of clowns, and the stock situations and characters of fairy tales, he weaves an unbearably bleak tragedy, all the more so for its calculated debunking and black humour.

Until quite recently, critics (since Goethe and Coleridge) and actors (since Betterton) have found the in-built comic potential of Lear quite disconcerting. This accounts, perhaps, for the scarcity of the play's productions, for the cutting and mauling it has often undergone, and the Romantics' verdict that it was 'unperformable.' Director Mohamed Abdel-Hadi, however, takes the opposite view, embracing the comic element whole-heartedly and wallowing in it. The initial ridiculousness of Lear and his subsequent buffoonery are openly acknowledged and shamelessly over-indulged; the essence of the tragedy, the production seems to argue, is not simply Lear's disrobement as king, but rather his self-abnegation as tragic hero: to become truly tragic, the king must wear motley.

The artificial and highly theatrical opening of the play might have inspired this parodic approach: not only is royalty here reduced to an outward show, a childish game of dressing up, but the whole scene strikes us an elaborate charade. The folk-tale provenance of the play is nowhere more apparent. Abdel-Hadi visually translates this unreal stagey quality into huge masks (each a grotesque parody of the face of one of the actors), exaggerated distorted movement patterns and batty black cloaks. The actors, like most travelling troupes in Shakespeare's day, number only six and perform all sixteen parts. As they indiscriminately exchange the horrible visors, doubling and trebling the wicked parts underneath, Lear's descent into purgatory acquires something of the sinister visual distortions, the unsettling protean permutations, the dizzying fluidity of a dream. We plunge into a world where witches, monsters and hobgoblins rub shoulders with the rugged illusion-makers of a rough itinerant show. At the heart of the production is the composite Shakespearean metaphor of life as both a dream and a stage show, and also the obsessive theme which is best summed up in Iago's sardonic words: "men should be what they seem."

This type of show, naturally, puts an enormous strain on the actors and requires great versatility; Abdel-Hadi's troupe acquit themselves admirably, giving us a colourful, varied, vivid and impressively proficient performance. Kamal Suliman as Lear is rightly most tragical when playing the Fool, and most ridiculous when wearing a straight face. Ali Khalifa as the fool, on the other hand, is fittingly melancholic and lackadaisical, punctuating his performance with a

soft mirthless laugh which rings hollow, evoking a terrible sense of emptiness. The principle regulating the acting in general was 'silly' for the goodies (taking into account the connotations of 'blessed' and 'natural' inherent in the old English origin of the word), and exaggerated grotesquery for the baddies. This acting policy has given us, in Salwa Mohamed Ali, the best Cordelia I have seen yet. Naturalistic Cordelias have invariably given me horrible bouts of embarrassment: imagine a naturalistic Cinderella! Delivering Cordelia as undisguisedly a member of the tribe of blessed innocents and fools is about the best thing an actress can do with the part. Salwa goes a step further, emphasizing the basic childishness of the character with a rag doll and the typical sulks of a child balking at a playmate's tyranny in imposing his own silly game. Her droll performance has the added benefit of bringing out the childish aspect of Lear himself, and it was fascinating to see her melt into the ghoulish mask of Goneril or the vapidly sensual mask of Regan. The rest of the parts were undertaken with great competence by Tariq Ismail, Maher Selim and Abdallah El-Sharqawi.

The truth, imaginative potency and uncluttered simplicity of Abdel-Hadi's conception extended to the stage design. Apart from the masks which were fixed on poles round the hall of this arena theatre when not in use, there was nothing but a raised circular platform topped by a red square with the king's glittering crown dangling overhead. The storm scenes were executed with equal simplicity: a roll of drums and a few flashlights hung round the actors' necks. The ending devised by Abdel-Hadi is bitterly ironic and reminiscent of Polanski's film version of *Macbeth*: As Edger dons the crown, which proves too big for him, sliding comically down his face, Gloucester marches in accompanied by Kent and recites his opening lines. One imagines another Edmund lurking in the shadows.

New Opera theatre:
28th Mar. 1991

Blind Man's Bluff

Few were surprised when *Point of View* (into its third season at the New Opera Theatre) was voted by critics Best Production of 1990; the Actor's Studio Ensemble is one of the most prestigious private theatre companies in Egypt, with a distinguished record of productions. Founded in 1980 by actor/director Mohamed Subhi and playwright Lenin El- Ramly (the only respectable Egyptian dramatist yet to make a living out of writing for the stage), the company has since put up a heroic fight to survive on its own artistic terms. So far it has succeeded - a remarkable feat considering the tidal wave of inflation that has sunk many a theatrical venture, pushing some to the brink of bankruptcy while forcing formerly respectable companies to make shameful concessions to sleazy oil-battened tastes.

The Studio's struggle to keep afloat without dumping its integrity is made harder by governmental harassment in the from of exorbitant taxes (a scandalous third of the box-office returns) and the newly introduced censoring fees! Imagine paying for your work to be censored and possibly banned! The Studio's founders, however, stood their ground and dug in their heels, at one point going to the expense of giving renegade companies, private and state-sponsored alike, a fig-

urative slap in the face, with an impressive production of *Hamlet* no less !

Like most of the Studio's productions, however, *Point of View* is a comedy with a serious import. We are in a charity home for the blond run by an unscrupulous gang. The gang – fat manager, sexy blonde, secretary and puny male nurse – not only regularly plunder the charity funds, leaving the inmates in disgraceful conditions, but also practise upon them the forms of deception. To keep their blind charges from rebelling, they feed them illusions and false reports about their physical surroundings. This results in heart-rending and side-splitting confusion as the inmates' mental images about their world constantly clash with the evidence of their remaining senses, and the evidence of our own eyes.

With the arrival of a new inmate, however, the fiction threatens to crack up. The newcomer, Abu El-Uyoon (in Arabic "the man with many eyes"), sets himself the task of calling the gang's bluff. Gradually he unmasks the miserable reality of life in the home and the unconscionable practices of its staff, falling in love with a near-blind inmate in the process. The gang, meanwhile, are rattled by his mysterious Tiresian powers. True to his name, he seemingly possesses many eyes, some at the back of his head, some even with X-rays! They suspect him of shamming and put him through a series of tests, the bluffing and counter-bluffing turning the play into an exciting battle of wits.

There is also the teasing mystery of Abu El-Uyoon himself, keeping us guessing to the end whether he is really blind. The play seems to be saying yes and no alternately, and sometimes in the same breath; and since playwright Lenin El-Ramly keeps this card up his sleeve for as long as he can, I shall not spoil the game.

What is important, though, is that as evidence and counter-evidence pile up, we experience something of the same confusion and sense of unreality which afflicts the bewildered inmates of the home. Suddenly we realise that the author is calling our bluff, challenging our claim to sight, to being different from the deluded tormentors and tormented inhabiting the home. By keeping the truth about Abu El-Uyon a well-guarded secret till near the end, El-Ramly deftly drags us unawares into the world of the blind, transforming the "home" into an ironic metaphor of the homeland!

Madness, Country Style

In Egypt, scouting the provinces for fresh talent and good shows is a hazardous business. I am not referring to the perilously narrow and bumpy roads, to the ever-present threat of rickety government buses (reserved for critics) breaking down, nor to the phenomenal absence of clean road-side cafés, efficient service-stations or public telephones and conveniences.

What I have in mind is that frustrated rage and dismal mortification when after hours on the road, in dingy offices and draughty halls, flirting with pneumonia and kowtowing to smirking civil servants, one finally submits to the ultimate insult and is force-fed a load of drivel washed down with endless glasses of black tepid tea, which wreaks havoc with your digestion the following morning. Verily, I am a fool, one suddenly discovers.

I have often felt like hitting my head against the nearest grimy wall (walls are always grimy in the provinces), swearing 'I've had it'; but I always recant. It is like an addiction, an insidious hereditary masochistic streak, or, perhaps, the proverbial curiosity which finally killed the cat.

only last week when I had finally settled down to a mellow depression over the Gulf, the telephone rang and up I bolted and went careering (or, rather, creaking, considering the state of the buses) down the Delta on three theatrical jaunts in a row.

The first took me to Damietta, a thriving furniture-manufacturing centre on the northern coast, where *The Lunatics* were waiting for me. "*The Lunatics* is good," I said, mulling over the title of the show, and echoing Polonius's sentiment about 'the mobled queen'. I was told it was an adaptation of the film version of Ken Kesey's *One flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. With material like that, one couldn't go far wrong, could one? Besides, I mused, sweeping aside a sudden premonition, the cinema has often plundered the stage for scripts, and with marvellous results: look at what it has made of Tennessee Williams It is about time theatre got its own back.

Well, it didn't. The film script was savagely pared down to its barest melodramatic bones, its ethical *finesse* was thickened into moral bludgeoning; its emotional density was thinned out to sentimental insipidity, and its subtle mixture of humour, terror and tenderness was replaced by a cloying cheap concoction of lumbering farce and heavy-handed preaching.

The abstract stage-design and the lighting gimmicks did not fool anybody, and moronic acting was embarrassingly emphatic and ploddingly pedestrian. As the cast staggered and swaggered, mumbled and stumbled, blubbered and dribbled, leered and chortled, the last vestiges of any human dignity the insane can lay a claim to were dragged through the mud.

The most offensive aspect of the production, however, for any progressive critic, especially a woman, was its cringing, conciliatory attitude to the provincial audience's out-dated views and vulgar tastes - an 'I'd do anything for you' sort of attitude. Its implicit endorsement of the inferior position of women and its pandering to male superiority and the most offensive and unjust of male prejudices and patriarchal rights were perniciously evident.

Male rape in the *Cuckoo* was replaced by female rape and cheerfully glossed over, while the right of a man to kill his wife on the slightest suspicion was staunchly upheld and sympathetically dwelt

on. In short, whatever the case, the violation of woman was tacitly condoned or viciously celebrated.

If one could believe that an ounce of thought went into the making of that show, one might possibly consider taking it to court. Suffice it to say that a few hasty lyrics were haphazardly added to the show at the very last moment at the request of the female lead who happens to be a minor singer. The lyricist, who had not apparently read the play, seems to have messed up the original conception of the character (if one ever existed); but the undaunted director stitched up what was left, tacked it on to the songs and threw it, flopping about in tatters, on the stage.

I did not know whether to laugh or cry when, suddenly, this *femme formidable* burst into song, trilling softly about a poor mother swallow and her little birdie son – the birdie in question being a full-grown practising psychiatrist – or when the sexually frustrated youth of the film, embodied here in a wraith-like figure, abruptly rushed at this solid mass of indomitable flesh in a passionate sexual frenzy in true Oedipal style.

There is an Egyptian proverb which says: "He who leaves his home runs the risk of losing his self esteem and the respect of others." Or, more succinctly: If you venture out, you get bashed about; I never gave this proverb more credence than on this occasion.

Shibeen El-Kom:
11th Apr. 1991

Quite a Trial !

A sickening awareness of rabid male chauvinism was all I got from *The Lunatics* of Damietta – the first stop on my theatrical tour of the provinces last week. Nothing could be worse, I thought, stoically setting off for Shibeen El-Kom, my second destination, in the western stretches of the Delta. There *The Trial of an Unknown Man* awaited us, and what a trial that was! parochial attitudes and male prejudices are bad enough, but I had not bargained for bigotry and religious fanaticism as well.

Insult here was added to injury: not only were women summarily banished from history and the stage (except for a feeble-minded, Osiris-hailing, arm-flailing Isis glimpsed briefly at the back of the stage); more significantly, the strong matriarchal voice in the printed play, embodied in the mother of the defendant, and symbolising the conscience of the nation, was truculently suppressed to be arrogantly replaced by a patriarchal one in the figure of a desert Arab and a prophet to boot. From the word go, the banners of the Islamic fundamentalists were hoisted and their loud slogans smeared over everything.

Artists, of course, have a right to air their views, however misguided, provided they do it artistically and without compromising others. I would have no quarrel with director Tal'at El-Dimirdash had he written his own text or chosen one which accorded with his ideology, or even distantly lent itself to such a fundamentalist agit-prop interpretation. But to take a play by a living author and disfigure it out of all recognition, turning its ideology upside down, is quite unforgiveable. Izz El-Din Isma'il, the author of this drama, is a poet known for his progressive views and socialist sympathies, and his intention here was to sift through Arab Islamic history for evidence of kindred tendencies.

The 'unknown man' of the first scene which sets the absurd trial in motion is identified in the text with a number of socialist rebels and reformers, but most forcefully with Abu-Zar El-Ghifari, the Prophet's companion and perhaps, in a very general sense, the first communist thinker in Islam.

Though somewhat dry and static, the play, by constantly pitting abstract ideas against the economic reality and social conditions of El-Ghifari's day, manages to achieve a degree of dramatic tension. The character himself, though an abstraction, has moments of deep pathos particularly as he experiences the bitterness of banishment: first from the warm circle of his friends into moral isolation, then into the burning desert and a lonely death. But whatever virtues the play possessed, including El-Ghifari, were recklessly scrapped from the performance, and what remained was adumbrated and strait-jacketed into a narrow bigoted conception. Every trick in the repertory was zealously used to sugar-coat the bitter pill and dupe us into swallowing it. As broad farce surrendered to cloying melodrama with fitful bouts of frenzied shouting, wooden acting, and intermittent violent scenic effects, we were subjected to savage tickling, sentimental pleading, emotional blackmail, religious pandering, vehement exhortation and downright bullying. The director even went so far as to dress his 'unknown man' (who is he kidding?) in the eloquent green and white combination which in the Iranian Shi'ite ritual drama known as Al-Ta'ziyeh identifies El-Hussein, the martyred grandson of the Prophet. An Islamic Khomeini-type revolution was clearly advocated.

At the end of this fire and brimstone sermon, my intelligence was so battered and insulted and my emotions so frayed I had no energy

left either to mourn the shattered integrity of the theatre or to dread the grim future that lies ahead. All I could do was drag myself out of this steaming hot-bed of fanaticism. "What a great mind is here overthrown" floated through my head: not mine or the director's, but the nation's.

El-Shatbi Arts Centre Theatre:
Alexandria, 18th. April,1991

Hounded

All last week I had dogs on the brain, and nasty vicious ones at that. It was all my fault. Out of a masochistic sense of duty, I tore myself from the bustling cafes of El-Hussein quarter and its merry crowds and set off for Alexandria to watch a visiting company from nearby Kafr El-Dawwar. The streets were hushed as I stepped off the bus at sunset and the usually gay Corniche wore a deserted, forlorn look. The same air of dereliction hung about the musty lobby of the once elegant Windsor hotel, now sadly fallen upon hard times. After a desolate meal in the empty dining room, I made my way to El-Shatbi cultural palace where *Mr. Simmawi* (in Arabic 'the poisonous one) *And The Dogs* were waiting for me. As it turned out, the poor man was not the least bit poisonous and more sinned against than sinning.

I hadn't expected much and rather hoped for further confirmation that a critic's life was a dog's life. The play, however, got off to a good start with a farcical mock-horror situation and a brilliant comic duet in the tradition of Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello. Sergeant Hamad, alias El-Simmawi, a renowned dog-catcher, and his lilylivered new assistant Khamis are sent to a posh summer resort in the desert to rout out a pack of wild dogs that have been harrassing the residents.

The lonely spot, however, has got more dangers than they had bargained for; at the gate of the only visible villa, an ambassador's residence, a huge sign warns in bold letters: Beware! Ferocious Watch Dogs on the Prowl after Dark! The message is given a more sinister edge by the presence of a life-size statue of a dog mounted on a high stand opposite the gate and strongly suggestive of the ancient Egyptian jackal god Anubis, the guardian of corpses and burial grounds. It's as if the whole place is one huge cemetery infested with marauding jackals. In a blue funk over the prospect of meeting so many members of the canine family, jackals and all, private khamis nearly wets himself and is only diverted from his fear by the gnawing pangs of hunger. Dreaming of food, his mind still runs on dogs; he recalls nostalgically the years he spent at the British Governor's home looking after his lady's soft poodles and gorging himself surreptitiously on their dainty morsels. Sergeant Hamad, in the role of moral preceptor, harshly reprimands him. This brings the first sequence to a close.

The second sequence picks up and develops the thematic lines established in the first, namely food and dogs, fear and hunger, giving them an ironical twist. The indomitable Hamad proves no sturdier than Khamis; he sneaks into the garden lured by the smell of cooked meat, thinking that the watch dogs are on his side, but is viciously attacked and rather than get a chunk of the delicious hunks he tastes only once a year, he leaves a bloody chunk of his own leg behind, contracting rabies into the bargain. He could have shot them and freed his leg, but he did not. Questioned by the shocked and bewildered Khamis (what's a gun for then?), he explains that the dogs are legally licenced and enjoy, like their owner, diplomatic immunity and the full protection of the international community! At this point, the so far hazy political significance of the parabolic farcical events comes into focus and the diluted realism of the opening scenes gives way to open expressionism. The identity of the ambassador and his watch dogs is soon revealed in a surrealistic meeting between Hamad and the ambassador's obviously Yankee security men. He undergoes a ritualistic lying-test, a lobotomy, and various other forms of torture suggesting cultural castration. The mixture of ritual, pop music and disco-dancing here lends the scene a feverish hallucinatory character.

Not only the U.S. and Israel come under the author's fire, but also the U.N. In a superb black-comedy scene, a U.N. vet, sent by the In-

ternational Society for the Protection of Animals to attend to the ambassador's dogs, waves aside the now grotesquely contorted figure of Hamad, refusing to assist him on legal grounds. When he is finally forced by Khamis to relent, he produces a dose of the rabies antidote, but suavely apologizes that he has no syringe! Thrown on his own resources, Khamis tries popular medicine, old charms, incense-burning and other superstitious practices to no avail. With growing horror and despair he watches the degrading agony of his friend and tutor, and when Hamad finally breaks into inhuman barking, the once idiotic cowardly Khamis (who has been growing all the time like the typical hero of a *bildungsroman)* picks up the gun and faces the gaping gate of the sinister villa across the statue of Anubis. This gesture has the curious effect of theatrically transforming the dog-like figure of Anubis into another ancient Egyptian dog-god with totally different connotations! Web Waut had the canine aspect of Anubis, but he was the god of open roads! Nevertheless, the play is far from optimistic. A big question mark hangs over Khamis's fate at the end. He may know now which dogs to shoot, but, as he himself bemoans, he hasn't yet mastered the use of a gun.

And all our yesterdays . . . .

If you happen to be a Muslim of the masculine gender, and keen on your polygamous rights, you would be well advised to keep well away, with whatever number of henny-pennies you have managed to bamboozle and hen-run, from a recent production called *Succour, O Rifa'a* .

Premiered in Suez, and currently on tour, Nō'man Ashour's documentary drama about the life and thought of the 19th-century enlightenment pioneer Rifa'a Rafi' El-Tahtawi will irk many and shame us all.

It will also give us food for thought: apart from the many wonderfully progressive stands that man took on the issues of freedom, education, tradition and government – deftly interwoven into the text – the highlight of the evening is Rifa'a's marriage to his cousin, Karima El-Ansari.

While a chorus enacts the traditional 'Zaffa' (wedding celebration), led by the mellifluous bride herself (stunningly presented by the melodic regional treat Ahlam Sa'd) a tiny tot of a boy gets off the stage to hand out among the audience a facsimile of the marriage contract.

In this legal document (printed at the end), drawn up by the pious Azharite groom himself, Sheikh Rifa'a, in bold contravention to the all-hallowed and time-sanctified rights of Muslim males, freely binds himself to his cousin for the duration of their lives, voluntarily forfeiting the right to divorce her at will, and legally forgoing the indulgence of enjoying four wives simultaneously together with whatever other female slaves he can afford.

The document insists that any cohabitation with other females automatically renders the marriage contract null and void and entitles the wife to the full rights of the divorcee under Islam.

To think that such a contract was drawn up in the 19th century!

Only a week ago I was approached by a militant feminist friend canvassing for a reform bill on marriage and divorce laws that Rifa'a had simply cut across with the flourish of a pen!

What bugged her, and what is bugging us all, the progressive women of Egypt (*and Succour O Rifa'a*), is the fact that when Egypt endorsed the United Nations' Declaration of Women's Rights it insisted on adding a codicil, rather like a sting in the tail, stipulating: "so long as it does not clash with the dictates of the Islamic Shari'a (law)!"

What a proviso! It amounts to a total doubling back, a negation of the most basic articles of the declaration. Sadly, in the year 1991, we seem to be still debating issues that our ancestors, like Rifa'a, Mohamed Abdou, Qasim Amin, Sheikh Ali Abdel-Razik and Houda Sha'rawi thought they had settled for us once and for all!

Some ghosts, however, refuse to be exorcised, and it is not a joke to wake up one morning and discover that your right to education, to work, to choosing your own clothes and mate and to simple human dignity is still a moot point violently debated by your masculine mentors!

To have come away from this production by director Abbas Ahmad with nothing else but El-Tahtawi's marriage contract would have been quite well worth it; the show, however, had other bonuses.

Most rewarding of all was the twin stage-set, by Ashraf Na'im, featuring at once Rifa'a's rural abode in Tahta and a Parisian *pension*. Arabesque portals and latticed partitions on the right contrasted har-

moniously with a row of lace drapes on the left while a number of candles and lanterns, deftly manipulated, lent both depth and several interesting points of visual departure.

Attiyat El-Abnoudi's film tracts of Paris, a typical Egyptian village school, and a traditional peasant funeral were unforgettable and highlighted dramatically the thorny question of cultural exchange and integration between east and west.

Abbas Ahmad also added some comic interludes of his own, devised to underline the basic issue of a woman's right to choose her husband. Traditional rituals and popular village-green games cut a high profile here while the Parisian 'lace curtains' figured poetically as a strong and haunting leitmotif.

East is east, and west is west, El-Tahtawi would concede; but he would argue, and has done in several books, that the 'Twain' can meet provided we find the necessary 'filters' (or 'philters'?!) In the play, El-Tahtawi's beloved Parisian 'curtains' become the 'filters of light' gently swathing the garish lights of Paris and the Egyptian sun in their soft benevolent shades.

This is a most rewarding and cliché-free production with lots of fun, visual exuberance, good music and easily digestible edification.

Marriage Contract

Sheikh Rifa'a El-Tahtawi

I, Rifa 'a Rafi' El-Tahtawi, the penner of this document, hereby legally bind myself as part of my marriage contract to my cousin, the honourable 'Hajjah' (who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca) Karima, daughter of the distinguished scholar Mohamed El-Farghali El Ansari, to remain married to her alone acquiring no other wife or mistress of any kind. The validity of the marriage is tied to this condition, so that if I acquire another wife or woman of any description, whoever she may be, my cousin will be automatically and irrevocably free. The same holds true if I purchase a slave girl.

I hereby solemnly and irrevocably pledge that for as long as she maintains our ties of love, honouring her home, children and her husband, caring for her servants and slave girls, dwelling in the the same place with me, I shall never marry another, acquire slave girls, or divorce her against her will until death us do part.

(Certified true copy of the original document kept at the Public Notary's Office in Cairo)

The Puppet theatre:
2nd May, 1991

Flogging a Dead Horse

Some productions lack the quality of mercy, turning political protest and self-criticism into the worst form of self-flagellation. Samir El-Asfouri's current modified version of his previous triumphant musical *Honey is Honey and Onions are Onions* (at the Puppet Theatre in Ataba) is one such production. Not that one ever expects wine and roses in a work by-El-Asfouri: he is notorious for his acrid cynicism and caustic humour; and barbed invective is his forte.

The fact that he was the one single major theatre director to have resisted the lure of oil-soiled money and the temptation of migrating to Iraq or the Gulf during the lean seventies hoisting the quixotic (and rather suspect) banners of political rejection, as many have done, might explain his sourness. But that is meat for a sociologist or a biographer. What concerns us here is the palpable effect the political events in the Arab world have had on the deep-seated cynicism of this brilliant director.

He was busy preparing for a new production of Eugene Ionesco's *Macbett* when the Gulf crisis hit him, snuffing whatever last flickers of hope had remained in the dark alleyways of his mind. He put the

project aside. 'It would look like a facile parody of Saddam; a cheap cashing in on the situation,' he explained, tacking on a wry comment on the National Theatre's current *Macbeth* as an afterthought. (It wasn't verbal; he mumbled something under his breath accompanying it with an eloquent wave of dismissal. *Macbeth* was damned forever!)

His turbulent soul, however, wouldn't give him peace; an outlet for his rage must be found. *Honey* was close at hand, and a further run was planned. It was then that he began to display worrying signs of hidden suicidal tendencies. The Gulf crisis had aggravated his already advanced state of misanthropy, and rather than Dionysius, Thanatos presided at the rehearsals. I attended one and watched in disbelief and horror a magnificent well-balanced show being slashed about and savagely mauled. The gentle satire and witty sarcasm of the original, concocted out of Bayram El-Tunsi's *Maqamat* (verse dramatic situations and anecdotes) suddenly grew claws and fangs, and ripped off, tearing at everything and everybody. On the opening night, the corpse of the once vibrant musical had already rotted and the smell of decay clung to the very seats. The naughty tantalizing hint of bawdiness that colours the typical Asfouri production here thickened and coarsened into repulsive obscenity. In the previous show, equally iconoclastic, the taste of honey was palpable despite the stinging smell of onions. The dish on offer was sweet and sour. In the modified version, nothing but the slop of kitchen sinks and the sludge of sewers is to be had.

With over ten years first-hand experience of the British theatre, five of them in the sixties, I am hardly shockable. I have gone through the horrors of Kenneth Bernard's *Dr Magico* with his sick cannibalistic sexual fantasies without turning a hair, and compared to that, my earlier experience of Amedee's sprawling and ever-expanding corpse and the huge mushrooms sprouting between the rotting boards of his dank living room in Ionesco's play seemed like a childish game of peek-a-boo. The nausea that attacked me during *Honey Honey*, particularly the salacious 'Arab Summit' new sequence (rendered as a series of gambling sessions, slanging matches and homosexual encounters), sprang, I suspect, from a rampant nihilism, an excruciating sense of utter futility: no logic can ever explain what has happened, the show seemed to argue, and all we can do is splash about in the muck and oil slicks left behind, hurling obscenities at everybody, like a flasher baring himself to shock the world, or a person cutting off his

nose to spite his face. Apart from three or four memorable scenes salvaged from the old version, the whole was infected with this spirit of obscene self-laceration.

Coming away from the show, I, an Egyptian who once cherished the hope of Arab unity, felt violated, besmirched with mud. It was as if someone had sadistically rubbed salt into my raw wounds, and as if El-Asfouri's whole purpose in reviving his once frothy and scintillating lampoon was to deal us all a deadly blow. The *Honey* has become polluted by too real a despair. Man cannot bear too much reality, T.S. Eliot has said. Neither can art.

El-Ghuri Cultural Centre :
9 th May 1991

A Street Cart Named Ghabn

In the 60s, long before the idea of 'community theatre' was ever heard of in Egypt, a daring young director by the name of Hanaa Abdel-Fattah turned his back on the capital and set off for Dinshwayy – a small village, famous in modern Egyptian history due to a British massacre which claimed the lives of many of its people. He spent six months there, living among the villagers and working with them over Yusuf Idris's play *The Cotton King* which was collectively altered and rewritten. The result was a true peasant drama which he staged in a barn. This peasant theatre, however, sadly came to an end when its progenitor left for Poland.

More then 20 years later, his younger brother, director Intisar Abdel-Fattah, came up with an equally dashing idea, if not completely new: a travelling theatre, not unlike the medieval pageant-wagon, or the ancient Greek cart of Thespis, but modelled on the typically Egyptian glass-topped food hand-carts. You can see them at any street corner in the popular areas of Cairo selling a variety of hot meals, particularly the local dish called 'Kushari' (a delicious mixture of rice, macaroni, and black lentils, served with hot sauce and fried onions) . The cart would have square openings for puppet-shows on its narrow front and back, while the sides could be lowered, making the cart into a stage, or kept in place and painted or hung up to serve as a back-

ground set if the action took place in front of the cart. The box-like underside would of course hold the actors' costumes, equipment and light props.The idea was impressive. This mobile versatile structure would literally carry the theatre into the market-place and the public square; it would be a boon to the theatre-starved population of the poorer quarters of Cairo and the provinces; it would also help revive the tradition of popular street shows which has nearly vanished and would help conserve and inject new life into the fast-fading indigenous popular theatrical forms.

Intisar built his cart with some financial help from the Cultural Palaces Authority (known then as The Mass Culture), christened it the Popular Ghabn Cart (Arabat Ghabn El-Chaabeya)and planned to launch it with a short one-actor comic piece by Alfred Farag, based on a story from the *Arabian Nights* and called *Lazy Buqbuq*. Unfortunately, as often happens in Egypt, the project soon foundered. The artist fell out with The Mass Culture officials (who had, incidentally, delayed the project for two years) over who takes credit for the experiment and to whom it belongs.

They separated, but Intisar, who had conveniently received an invitation to perform in Rome, backed by the Ministry of Culture here, was allowed to keep his beloved cart for a while. He carried it with his few actors to Italy where, together with some Italian artists, he worked out a new and more amplified version of *Buqbuq* in a mixture of Arabic and Italian.

This joint venture was staged in the garden of the Egyptian Academy in Rome, and was enthusiastically received from what I heard. That may very well have been the case, but when I saw it on videotape, I couldn't make much sense of it, nor could I discover any vital connection between the Italian bits, interesting and visually impressive as they were, and the story of the lazy day-dreamer Buqbuq. The combination seemed arbitrary and rather forced. Also, I found it bitterly ironical that what had started as a project for the benefit of the poor and deprived should end up as something of a tourist attraction, designed to impress a leisured audience. After the Roman trip, the cart was whisked away from Intisar and left to rot in a warehouse somewhere . The indefatigable Intisar, however, built himself a new one with his own money . He tells me that so far he has given six performances with the new cart, five in Ismailia, during some festival,

and one in the garden of the Dutch Cultural Centre - hardly a market-place or a public square. Unfortunately, I have not seen any of those performances, but whatever their artistic quality, numerically,they present a very poor record of the cart's public appearances in three years . Whether Intisar's increasing association with the Opera House and its work has anything to do with his relative neglect of his cart is anybody's guess . What I fear is that one day, he may wake up to find he is so used to its cool, aristocratic, rarefied atmosphere, that he cannot venture out into the open air .

The cart does not figure in Intisar's latest production, but at least the troupe still bears its name El Araba El-chabeya. *Any One To Translate ?* is yet another new version of the persistent Buqbuq, this time with a French, rather than Italian, infusion ministered by 'Les fous à réaction' of Ville de Lille. The new version is infinitely better than the last, more well-knit and better integrated. Into the story of Buqbuq, Intisar introduced another very short drama by Alfred Farag, imaginatively interweaving both. The oppressed peasant in the *Straw Circle*, imprisoned in an imaginary circle built out of his own fears and delusions, becomes in the adaptation the son of the destitute Buqbuq who lives in a world of dreams and illusions. What is more, the son is only an imaginary son spun out of Buqbuq's marriage fantasy. In other words, the father in his prison-house of dreams, dreams up a son who is also a prisoner of dreams.

The power of dreams and illusions emerges as the central theme of the play, rather than the possibility of communication as the director claims and the title seems to indicate. Indeed, dreams in the play do not only project an illusory reality: they also suck into their vortex the real tramps and vagrants who surround Buqbuq on the rubbish dump of a market-place at the beginning, transforming them into figures in his dream or figments of his imagination.

The Shakespearean metaphor of life as both a transient performance, spun out of airy nothingness, and a short collective dream 'rounded with sleep' dominates the play: it actually begins with the characters asleep on the rubbish heap, and ends with a simulation of the gestures and expressions of waking up. The dream metaphor informs not only the content of the scenes and their visual and auditory composition, but the total design, giving us strange, original and exciting combinations in terms of characters, colours, costumes, sounds

and language. And though the show may look at first loose and disconnected, a jumble of discordant elements floating in a vacuum without anchor in place or time, on closer inspection, it reveals an inner coherence not dissimilar to that of a dream, or a surrealistic painting.

In this type of structure, the alien French element blended well with the varied Egyptian folk material, forming an integral part of the shape and meaning of the show. Needless to say, the musical side was particularly interesting, but this is always the case in Intisar's productions since he is a professional composer, having composed the much acclaimed film music of *The Collar and The Bracelet*.

With his Franco-Arab experiment yielding such good results, I won't be surprised if we find Buqbuq, yet again, next year fraternizing with the Germans or the British. But this time, let us hope he brings along his much neglected cart and takes it out onto the streets:

A Lean Harvest

Last week's heat wave seems to have dried up the Thespian wells, giving us a particularly lean theatrical week. Not that one would have expected it from a list of the plays attempted; indeed, three of them sported impressive authorial names, two of which, Strindberg's and Durrenmatt's, are of international fame. Nor was it simply a question of number; any week that yields a good *Miss Julia* (despite her peccadilloes) could be deemed rich and rewarding, let alone one which boasts *An Angel Comes to Babylon* and Ali Salem's The *Optimist*, not to mention a plagiarised Arabic version of a mysterious Spanish farce. In terms of theatrical experience, however, the week's mixed fare has proved very meager, half-baked, unseasoned and shabbily served.

Sitting through *Miss Julia* I was hard put to square what I remember of the written text with what was taking place on stage. Was this the gem that launched a thousand productions?! I was prepared for a certain amount of amateurishness; one always is with young actors. But I hadn't expected this! Hadn't the invitation card carried the prestigious name of Galal El-Sharqawi's Masrah El–Fann (the theatre

of art)?! Hadn't it hailed the production as the firstborn of its new experimental studio?

How could a distinguished director of long experience like El-Sharqawi permit his budding actress of a daughter, Abeer, to venture into the ruthless arena of public performance and wrestle with such a taxing part as the title role without first coaching her? Was he simply humouring a starry-eyed adolescent? Did he attend one rehearsal then go away thinking: don't spoil the kid's fun, but don't take it too seriously?! Was it this that made him let them use his name, or rather, the name of his private theatrical company, while denying them his tutelage and theatrical premises, exiling them to the dreary wastes of El–Samir Theatre?!

El-Samir's grey rambling drabness communicated itself to the show, infecting the acting and stage-design. One good thing, however, came out of the notoriously bad acoustics of this unfortunate theatre: the actors were barely audible except to the distinguished occupants of the first two rows. And considering the atrociously inept handling of Strindberg's dialogue, the painfully clumsy, lacklustre delivery and poor timing, what a blessing that was for the people at the back. They could just recline in their seats, hard as they are, and feast their eyes on the voluptuous abundance of Miss El-Sharqawi, or alternatively if given to higher pursuits, they could ponder the quirkiness of human nature which can cause such an attractive, richly-endowed female to become, even momentarily, besotted with a simpering (rather then simmering) squashed cabbage leaf like the Jean of the evening. I am not saying that Miss El-Sharqawi lacks talent; she has plenty of that together with the natural assets of a powerful presence and unaffected sincerity. But a lighter coat of flesh and fat padding would suit her better, while more muscle, vocal training and technical polishing might firm up her acting.

As for Christine's role, it was presented in the manner of a classroom reading exercise, limply delivered by a pupil with grave speech defects.

By the end of the evening, Strindberg's delicate masterpiece had sunk under the combined weight of the heroine, the tacky cluttered set, the elaborately pointless movement and the shy, embarrassed handling, typically oriental, of the dodgy subject of female sexuality.

At the Howard Theatre, on the other hand, the AUC's production of Ali Salem's *The Optimist* (a political variation on Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*) showed more expertise. The hero, however,who is the single speaking voice of the play, lacked clear enunciation and breath control; and these shortcomings were aggravated by the strenuous movement patterns superimposed, somewhat superfluously, on the verbal text. The prominent feature of the evening was a growing sense of fatigue, which spiralled at moments, as the actor grunted, panted and sweated, to peaks of utter exhaustion.

Durrenmatt's *An Angel Comes to Babylon* cost me an uncomfortable trip to Mansoura for which the production failed to make up. As usual, the text was adapted in the all-hallowed tradition of mass culture productions; in other words, it was hacked in places, peppered with jokes and topical references and doused with tedious songs and silly dances.

The acting was exceptionally good; even the minor roles were handled with proficiency and care. But whatever pleasure we derived from the actors was systematically soured by the insistent, all-too-frequent intrusion of a singing chorus of commentators. Not that we could make a word of what they were saying; the faulty sound-system of the Mansoura theatre took care of that. A pity, since the lyrics were composed by the famous poet Ahmad Fouad Nigm. As the evening wore on, the incomprehensible din issuing from the stage became too painfully loud and frustrating, leaving me at the end with a splitting headache.

The Night of Mitwalli's Wedding, a very trivial affair, wound up my theatrical week. The printed programme boldly claims that it is an original composition but a friend of mine assures me that it is an adaptation of a Spanish play called *Three Hats from Cuba;* the author's name he can't remember. Well, not that it matters; plagiarism is a common enough practice in mass culture productions where the plundering of foreigners is tacitly condoned.

What annoyed me was not so much the theft as the pettiness of the thief. Tripe is everywhere; you don't have to go to Spain for it, let alone barter your honesty. The purloined object proved worthless, a dull and insipid farce. And though Ashraf Farouq, in the title role, and Yasmin as the dancer, bent over backwards to inject some life into the

evening and squeeze out a few laughs, the production was quite beyond redemption. I stoically bore it for two hours (it lasts four), alternately wincing, squirming and shuddering, and growing stupider by the minute, until, finally, by the end of the first part, my stamina gave way and I considered it better for my sanity to flee.

Much Ado About Nothing

Last year Karam Mutawi, head of the State Theatre Organisation, came up with the idea of organising an annual gala evening in honour of Egyptian theatre artists.

The big event was planned to coincide with the celebrations marking International Theatre Day, and was christened Youm Wafaa El-Masrah El-Masri (The Egyptian Theatre's Remembrance Day). Quite a worthy idea, in fact, only he might have given it a more auspicious name. The word Wafaa in Arabic (literally gratitude) is almost identically homophonic with the gruesome word Wafaah (death) – a coincidence which, given the present (sorry) state of the Egyptian theatre, occasioned many a bitter pun.

Whether the choice of name has anything to do with the fact that bad luck has dogged the idea since its inception, is a matter for astrologers to settle.

On a more mundane level, one can detect a lot of good old professional jealousy behind this year's mistakes, not to mention the inevitably sloppy organisation and the evident artistic perfunctoriness which invariably characterises such official festive occasions.

As usual, far too many invitations were printed and far too many of them went into the wrong hands. The National Theatre swarmed with bureaucrats and their families and they beat everybody to the seats, leaving many an artist to mark the occasion standing up. The overcrowding naturally rendered the air-conditioning totally ineffective, and by the end of the evening, the heat and stuffiness had become quite insufferable.

No wonder tempers flared up causing the final ruction.

The star of the evening and guest of honour was Fatma Rushdi, in her first public appearance for nearly 40 years after a thriving acting career which spanned almost a quarter century from the mid-1920s onwards.

Well into her eighties, she looked a veritable Cinderella in a rose-coloured frilly dress, and was all nods and smiles, and very much all there. Miss Rushdi's charismatic presence, well-tested by generations of audiences, and her vintage charm entranced everybody.

But the spell was shortly broken by a rude fanfare from the stage to announce the beginning of the evening's entertainment. *The Curtains Will Ne'er Come Down* turned out to be a bloodless, sketchy, somewhat confused and rather pretentious review of the history of the Egyptian stage since Ya'coub Sannu' in the 1870s. There was a lot of narration, drenched with naive music and milk-soppy lyrics and interspersed with dramatic fragments featuring, in a painfully simplistic and embarrassingly puerile manner, scenes from the lives of some of the past *hommes de theatre*. For extra padding, an oratorical speech from Abdul-Rahman El-Sharqawi's poetic drama *A Youth Called Mahran* was declaimed, or rather, thundered by Abdallah Ghayth, while two actors dressed like marionettes kept buzzing around, whizzing in and out with their insipid patter and chatter. The point of having them still eludes me. I guess director El-Sayyid Radi, who has spent all his life doing farces and vaudevilles, was trying for once to be clever and catch up with the latest fads and fashions in the theatre.

Break the willing suspension of disbelief he certainly did, among other breakages. But whether he achieved it in an epic or a meta-theatrical style, whatever that means, is still a moot point debated by critics.

Nor did Mr. Radi's ambitions stop at that. He had apparently heard of the Living Theatre, and we had a spot of that too – Radi-style of course.

At one point, actress Sohair El-Murshidi (off stage Mrs. Karam Mutawi), who sat regally next to Miss Rushdi in a stage-side box to play the gracious hostess, burst into our view in the glaring aura of a spotlight. She magicked up a microphone, which she held tightly to her mouth, and waved a sheet of paper which she told us held a rhapsodic apostrophe to the theatre penned by Miss Rushdi in her salad days.

She made a big show of pressing the authoress to voice her own words. The authoress, however, carefully instructed beforehand, dutifully demurred, in her turn pressing Sohair to do the honours.

The way Sohair read it was scandalous. If she had been told that the whole purpose of the evening was to hold Miss Rushdi up to public ridicule she could not have put into her delivery as much sarcasm, mimicry and ridicule.

Miss Rushdi either didn't notice or was too sophisticated to care. Her troubles, though, were far from over. More bullying and petty jealousy were yet to come.

Just as the miserable show was coming to a close, with the actors preparing to line up to take their bows, and with the music swelling to a crescendo in anticipation of the final flourish or crash, Miss Amina Rizq, a veteran classical actress of Miss Rushdi's years, jumped up from her seat in the stalls and charged down the aisle with the grim ferocity of a rhino bearing down on a rival. Before anybody knew what was happening she was up on the stage bawling into a microphone, bringing the music to a halt and screaming at everybody to shut up and listen. When the commotion she created died down and she finally had her way, she proceeded passionately to admonish the Minister, the public and the whole nation for shamefully neglecting to pay homage to Yusuf Wahbi's name and his many glorious contributions to the acting profession in Egypt.

She was right of course, in a sense. Wahbi's name only received a cursory mention in the course of the evening, and it warrants much more. He was the founder, owner, manager and *jeune-premier* of the

renowned Ramses Company which at one time nurtured many talents and played the role of workshop to the cinema in its early stages, supplying many of its stars. But then, you can't have everybody on the same evening.

However righteous Miss Rizq's anger was, my incorrigibly nitpicking mind could not help noticing a hint of sour grapes. Did I imagine it, or were those lethal shafts of anger and barbed darts of fury somewhat pointed in the direction of Miss Rushdi's box? After all, they were colleagues and old rivals. Both had great talent and versatility, but Miss Rushdi has always possessed more beauty, sex appeal and vitality.

Still, Miss Rizq has had the longer career of the two. She's very much still around in cinema and television, while Miss Rushdi has been living in seclusion for the past forty years somewhere in Suez. Doesn't that even the scores.

For a few minutes, Miss Rizq stole the show. Her theatrical outburst, true or false (it's very hard to tell with actors), had worked. But she hadn't bargained for rivalry from a younger generation.

Actress Kismat Shireen, in a tight, low-back, flaming-red dress was quick to jump on the bandwagon, launching her own bid for publicity.

After all, she labours under the delusion that she is the greatest actress in Egypt and maintains that only history will vindicate her.

She tried to join Miss Rizq on the stage, and when the redoubtable actress wouldn't let her, she stood in the middle of the aisle shouting:"It's a shame Mr. Minister! It's a shame!."

When Miss Rizq haughtily stamped off the stage and out, Miss Shireen's voice fell a whole two octaves lower, then gradually petered out. For recompense, she joined Mr. Ghayth in the front row, uninvited, usurping the seat next to him, and then proceeded to pour her grievances into the poor man's ears. Talk of divine vengeance!

Our Minister, with his usual mixture of conciliatory tact, gracious authority and crafty dodginess, managed to bring things under control. The bubble was burst. He promised Miss Rizq a special gala evening exclusively to Yusuf Wahbi and herself (which Karam Mutawi has subsequently washed his hands of in public), and allowed her to re-

main beside him on the stage as an honorary figure while he handed out the certificates of merit awarded this year to playwrights No'man Ashour, Rashad Rushdi, Abdul Rahman El-Sharqawi, Yusuf Idris, and Sa'd El- Din Wahba.

Miss Rizq's bristling feathers folded meekly, but though her simmering eyes mellowed to dewiness, there was a hard glint of triumph somewhere. No wonder! By then, no one remembered Miss Rushdi.

She was completely routed. Miss Rizq had stage-directed herself into the role of queen of the evening and deftly stolen the show. But not quite.

With actresses, she who gets the more applause with the least visible effort carries off the day. By this criterion, the winner was most certainly Samiha Ayoub.

She was present in her capacity as Mrs. Wahba to receive her husband's certificate of merit. But as she mounted the stage in her elegant white dress, tall, graceful and looking competent and cheerful as ever, the hall exploded into a whole three-minute unsolicited resounding ovation. For me, it was, in terms of timing, the highest theatrical point of the evening, and, paradoxically, in terms of real spontaneous feeling, the one moment totally free of artifice.

The Name of the Game

With two Cairo International Experimental Theatre Festivals behind us, each providing 10 days of intense exposure to the latest trends and fads in the Western performing arts, our young Egyptian directors are finally showing grave signs of infection. The experimental fever has taken the shape of a fast-spreading rebellion against the long-standing tyranny of the word.

Increasingly, young directors, their courage boosted by the audacity of their Western counterparts, are challenging the primacy of the written text in the theatre and adopting a Hamletian pose of disdain for 'words'. We had just got used to texts being adapted, mauled and severely cut when the German choreographer Maria Lerschenberg-Tony brought over her fascinating silent production of Sartre's *Huis Clos* last year, and to and behold, suddenly a cry went up: Macbeth shall "speak" no more! The body has become the new gospel; Peter Brook and Grotowski, the new prophets. In conversation their names are constantly dropped like bombs to crush the opponent – in this case the playwright and the conservative critic.

In a tradition that is primarily rhetorical and literary, centring on the sacred authority of the word; in a culture that has long discouraged

(at times banning) all forms of artistic representation, and where the body is taboo (especially in the case of women), to attempt to banish the stage and rely solely on body language is tantamount to sacrilege. It was, perhaps, a dim awareness of the ideological implications of this imported theatrical form, and its disruptive drive, that has caused the stir and heated controversy surrounding Mohamed Mansour's production *The Game* .

The show consists of a sequence of sketches relying purely on mime and dance. A thin political narrative thread is provided to organise them into three units which, though of unequal length and power, curiously correspond to the classical dramatic formula of situation, complication and dénouement or beginning, middle and end. This, perhaps, explains the occasional feeling that one was watching a traditional play, albeit without words. But narrative coherence apart, the show has managed to attain, through an intricate pattern of movement, a degree of the parodic intent and fragmentary style, symptomatic of post-modernist theatre.

Mansour has adopted a deconstructive technique, breaking down every gesture into its most basic components which are rendered jerkily, in a series of still frames, as it were, moving at different speeds. This principle of fragmentation which governs the show as a whole is carried over into the composition of each scene: portions of the total, still configuration are individually picked out as if by a camera; and while they spring into action, the rest remain frozen; when the "camera" (spotlight) has done the rounds, they start to connect and interact gradually until the whole comes alive. This technique which requires accurate synchronization and split-second timing was executed by the actors with admirable precision to the accompaniment of a crazy medley of pop and classical, western and oriental music.

The first unit consists of a series of funny sketches depicting negative aspects of Egyptian life. It winds up with a grotesque sequence about the sinister and destructive role of television in Third World countries. The whole stage becomes one huge TV set with one lonely, bored viewer flipping over the channels outside the proscenium arch. A syncopated American gangster film is succeeded by a hilarious oriental dance, farcical and inane cultural talk-shows, and two "blood and thunder" scenes from a typically melodramatic Egyptian serial. The poor viewer is startled when the images begin to step out of the

screen. As they invade his privacy, consume his food, chase him around, seduce and attack him and finally threaten to slice him up and pack him into frozen-meat bags, he is forced to fly, like *Alice through the Looking Glass,* into the fictional world behind the screen, becoming himself a fiction! At this point, the sequence acquires the status of a scathingly ironical metaphor, all the more eloquent for the absence of words, and with them, reason and common sense.

The second unit reviews, in quick flashes, by means of portable screens, the long and chequered history of Egypt up to the military debacle of 1967. Then, suddenly the stage is empty, except for a few washing lines swaying gently in the wind displaying rags. A symbolic white dress is replaced first by a bawdy red feminine underslip, and then by the Egyptian flag. A hatted foreigner then creeps in to steal it.

This announces the beginning of the last, and one might add, weakest sequence: the search for the lost flag. The flag, needless to say, is finally found, after a lot of torch-waving-about-in-the-dark, and a series of uninspired sketches indicating industrious work as the solution. The end may be simplistically optimistic, and rather facile,but the overall style of the show works against such a conclusion.

Netting a Poor Catch

For the past ten days, theatrical troupes from all over Egypt have been flocking to Alexandria to compete in the annual contest for the best Cultural Palaces productions. The contest is the crowning event of a long process of threshing and sampling intended to choose the best of the year's harvest. Over thirty productions applied to take part, but only fourteen met the minimal required artistic standards. And judging by what I have seen of the festival so far, I shudder to think what the others were like.

No wonder Alexandria was chosen to host the occasion; its salutary sea air was deemed a suitable palliative to help the critics and the audience digest the stodgy fare, and its 'great Neptune's ocean', it was hoped, might wash its memory clean from their heads!

The hosting city, predictably, opened the festival with a production (the second I have seen this year) of Salah Mitwali's mediocre play *What Matters is The Score*. This attraction for bad plays sometimes puzzles me, especially in the case of talented directors like Subhi Yusuf. It can only be explained by the director's desire to become sole author of the show and gather to himself all the credit. Invariably,

however, it backfires. To the faults of a confused, rambling text which swings erratically from the political to the metaphysical, and back from the sublime to the ridiculous, on the much frayed thematic rope of freedom, the director added a clutter of projected slides (featuring scenes from football matches with a running commentary).

A medley of obtrusive songs, bad acting, faulty tempo and a naive set representing a football net sums up the show. It lasts for two hours; but the time it takes us to move with the hero, at his painfully slow and heavy pace, from the mundane sit-in he stages on the field to his abstract eternal cell in limbo seems like eternity.

Freedom from political oppression and metaphysical coercion was once more the central thematic thread in the second show. *Have It Your Own Way* by Lenin El-Ramly (his earliest published text) traces in the style of a strip-cartoon the life of its hero from the moment he bursts upon the world screaming, mewling and puking, through the experiences of a soul-killing education, a deprived adolescence, cheerless work and frustrated marriage and parenthood, until he is carried out bellowing in protest against the final and inevitable tyranny of death.

But not only freedom as a theme carries over from the previous show; the netted look of the set does too. An iron fence interwoven with cobwebs and spiders confines the acting space in a semicircle, while a huge papier-maché statue of liberty looms large in the background. Despite some good acting, and the typical frothy El-Ramly dialogue and bubbling humour, the show seemed interminably repetitive, spelling out the negation of its title *ad infinitum* with each word, move, or gesture.

Up In Smoke, Mikhail Roman's vintage piece, dating back to the sixties, and also his earliest known text, followed, adding yet another variation on the theme of freedom.Typically, the play carries all the faults of a first *oeuvre,* even a first *chef d'oeuvre*. It was a thematic hold-all for everything to follow; if you know it, you know Roman's world. Alienation, incest, existential despair, the lethal hatred for all bourgeois establishments, especially the family, are all there, peppered with socialist ideological smatterings and a touch of German *angst*.

Director Alfred Kamal made a proper mess of things; he mixed naturalism and expressionism willy-nilly, and strove to fuse them in

the melting-pot of melodrama, hoping that it would also melt away the glaring faults of his all too stagey directing and the inexperience of his actors.

By the end of the evening, Hamdi, the frustrated intellectual and student of philosophy (in the grand Hamletian tradition), who takes to drugs (as his prototype took to madness) in an escapist bid from the capitalist patriarchal system, becomes a frenzied sentimental figure touting for the traditional rounds of applause after each triple crescendo repetition.

The obfuscating smoggy atmosphere of *Up In Smoke*, with the same good old repetitive nets framing the sets, took a lot of Alexandrian sea air to dispel. But what the future holds for us poor panel of judging critics remains to be seen!

Something Rich and Strange

Within only four months of the last triumphant royal visit of *King Lear* and *Richard III* to Egypt, the British Council has decided to treat us to yet another glimpse of the regal splendours of the National Theatre's rich treasure house. And the item ferried over this time was indeed a welcome and refreshing change.

Jatinder Verma's Anglo-Indianisation of Moliere's French *Tartuffe* may strike some as a technical *tour de force*, a daring experiment in harnessing and merging widely divergent theatrical conventions; to others, it may seem an exotic feat of semiotic superimposition, presenting three different cultural frames simultaneously in a brilliant theatrical "triple-exposure". The value of the work, however, does not solely consist in its formal achievements; underneath the technical panache and theatrical virtuosity there runs a deep and serious intent.

Explaining the ideological groundwork of his experimentation with the Tara Arts (Britain's leading Asian theatre company) since 1976, Verma has described his work as "a step towards acknowledging that Asians are part of the national culture ... and as such, are instrumental in redefining what is today meant by the term 'national'."

The production I saw at the open-air theatre of the Egyptian Cultural Centre, however, professes more. It is not simply a plea for racial harmony inside Britain, or even the world over, however worthy such a cause is; nor does it just knock the bottom out of the age-old East-West confrontation. What the production ultimately does is to propose a definition of cultural identity as a dynamic, dialectical process which, conditionally, involves the 'Other'; an ongoing process of stepping in and out, of assimilation and rejection, of belonging and alienation.

Verma, of course, is not the first director to pick out a classical work, remove it from its natural habitat and give it a different local habitation and name. In this respect, his experiment has a long genealogy, reaching back to the Renaissance and even earlier. What distinguishes his work from the run-of-the mill adaptations, iconoclastic parodies of Alfred Jarry, or W. B. Yeats's imitation of the Asian theatre in his Irish Plays for Dancers, or even such recent, distinguished transcultural productions as Ariane Mnouchkine's Japanese versions of Shakespeare at Le Theatre du Soleil in Paris, is an underlying sense of urgent involvement, of serious and thoughtful engagement, in a deeply problematic way, with the cultural implications of the theatrical conventions it grapples with.

It is this sense of deep involvement which saves the show from being a mere collocation of gimmicks, or a mere exercise in versatility. For these actors, one felt, rendering a French text in a variety of English interlaced with Urdu, and in a variety of styles, sliding from the rigidly stylized masked conventions of the Asian theatre, to the rough and tumble conventions of the Italian *commedia dell'artie*, then to the stylish and artificial conventions of the comedy of manners (in both Britain and France), and weaving some sort of unity out of these disparate elements was no mere artistic challenge; it was a question of life and death - of situating oneself culturally in the world and relating to it.

Magdalen Rubalcava's set was at once beautiful and eloquent, reflecting visually the dialectical formal structure of the production. The open-air, green tennis-court carried a hint of conflict though in a sporting manner, while the correspondence between the green tennis net enclosing the court at the back and the netted white temple dome topping it hinted at the cultural nature of the conflict. On three sides, three

doors opened on to the court, presumably representing the three cultural contestants - the British, French, and Indian.

On the right and left of the central back door, which revealed a swing when opened - a clear sign of vacillation - were a cupboard and a ladder; the one serving not just as a useful hiding-place for the characters in the plot, but also symbolizing the static storehouse of tradition, while the other represented an active soaring above and reaching out beyond the inherited. The dialectical connection between the two places was established by the carrier pigeons, who hold the promise of love and fulfilment. As they soared invisibly above the ladder, and materialized visibly, on a swing, inside the cupboard or chest, they reconciled the inherited thesis and the acquired antithesis.

The synthesis, however, was not achieved on the level of plot, but on the formal, aesthetic level. Lining the front of the acting space, on the imaginary line separating actors and audiences, was a row of tasseled urns bearing lighted torches across which the actors addressed the spectators, establishing a community of experience to the tunes of a flute, an Indian sitar, drums and percussion instruments.

The imaginative impact of the show was tremendous; it was like magic, but magic with a hard intellectual core. It brought to my mind W.B. Yeats' words upon first encountering the Balinese dancers. He said: "What is there left for us that have seen the newly-discovered stability of things changed from enthusiasm to a weariness... but to discover an art of the theatre which shall be joyful, fantastic, extravagant, whimsical, beautiful, resonant and altogether reckless..", and, one might add, terribly responsible and serious.

Pick of the Bunch

Here we go again, back to the Cultural Palaces Theatrical Contest in Alexandria, picking up where we left off a couple of weeks ago.

The first three nights of the contest were so limp and depressing that one was sorely tempted to pack up and skedaddle. On the morn of the fourth day, however, *Atallah* arrived from Zagazig in a veritable ballyhoo, full of pomp and swagger, and things began to look up.

The aforementioned *Atallah* is none other than the Iago-crossed Othello, here given an Egyptian identity instead of his Moorish one, the Arabised version of the name (which means "the gift of God"), and carted, withal, to a rural setting in Upper Egypt, a region notorious for its moral bigotry, rigid sexual taboos, narrow-minded view of conjugal fidelity and disproportionately high rate of *crimes passionels*. No wonder then that the accent, in this adaptation which was first performed in the late sixties, and has since been revived more than once, fell primarily, and, one might add, exclusively, on sex. In consequence, the multi-layered moral and emotional complexity of the original Shakespearean text was ruthlessly peeled off, while the religious implications, embedded in the imagery, were crassly stripped

away; gone too was the all too important theme of cultural conflict and alienation.

In short, the adaptation referred the Shakespearean progeny back to its vulgar Italian progenitor, rendering *Atallah* ludicrous and promoting sexual jealousy as the sole propeller of the action and focus of interest. The final impression was of a lanky, scrawny, gangling text, grotesquely deformed and very reminiscent of a starved child, all bones and an unnaturally over-blown and protruding stomach.

The ornate and somewhat razzle-dazzle style of the production, however, went a long way towards padding up the adaptation's sagging parts, and smoothing out its melodramatic bulges; it fleshed out the by now hollow and emaciated plot with folk songs and dances and well-choreographed group movement. The set, which displayed a bustling village square, with rolling fields at the back and a symbolic windmill (in place of the original whirling sea-storm) was at once simple, colourful and versatile; it enabled director Hasan Salama to capture something of the rhythmical flow and cinematic fluidity of the typical Shakespearean scene, and there was some very good acting to boot.

The evening moved at a fast pace; but whether that was due to the artistic skill of the director or to the fact that the adaptation, having divested the hero of his thematic trappings and shorn him of any moral scruples, allowed him to make short shrift of his beloved Desdemona and summarily dispatch her to the other world, remains questionable.

Next on the schedule was *Succour, O Rifa'a* which I had seen in Suez and raved about in this very corner only a few weeks ago (25 April); but, "Oh," as Ophelia would say, "to have seen what I've seen, see what I see!" The troupe which had been on the road for weeks, performing in odd places, arrived in Alexandria only half an hour before the show was due to start, looking battered and bedraggled and ready to drop. What is more, they seemed to have lost most of their set and props on the way; gone were the gentle, symbolic, pink lace drapes and latticed portals together with most of the lanterns and practically all of the film footage. The perfomance seemed to mock the original production and it was heart-rending to watch an exquisite work reduced to such tattered drabness.

Bye Bye, Arabs, a rumbustious and scathing political satire with an element of fantasy, followed. However, neither the gambols of its frolicking *jinni,* nor the sardonic wit of its hero, Mr. Arab, and his rancorous humour could dispel the lingering sadness after the *Rifa'a* debacle. One could not help wondering what would happen to Mr. Arab if his imaginary journeying through the Arab world (in a quest for unity) was coupled with a realistic, down-to-earth tour of the provinces! Nevertheless, the production was exceedingly well-timed, and drove its message home. Coming in the aftermath of the Gulf disaster, it was an almost unbearably cruel reminder of the once-cherished Pan-Arab dream. And as if to multiply our sorrows, by an ironical quirk of fate, this play, which is set in Kuwait, was succeeded by a play set in Baghdad.

The Tragedy of El-Hallaj (or *Murder in Baghdad*), the late Salah Abdel-Saboor's poetic religious drama, and the nearest Arabic equivalent of T.S.Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (to which it is clearly indebted) made the trip all the way from Assyout (a turbulent hot-bed of religious fundamentalism), in this recent production, to take us back in time to the year 309 Hijra (c 930 A D) and introduce us to its mystic-rebel hero El-Hussein Bin El-Mansour, alias El-Hallaj. The tragedy of this tormented hero consists in his being at once a mystic, driven to pursue his own individual salvation, and a social reformer and political rebel, deeply involved in the suffering of his fellow citizens. Historically, he was tried and executed for religious heresy; that was the official charge. His real crime, however, in the eyes of the system, was political agitation.

Abdel-Saboor found in this historical figure an apt venhicle to project his own dilemma as an intellectual torn between the overpowering urge to dedicate himself completely to art and the demands of his socialist creed which insists on political action. In the poet's imagination, the dilemma of the historical Hallaj merged with Hamlet's dilemma, acquiring something of the Shakespearan hero's rich ambiguity.

In the hands of director Hassan El-Wazir, however, Abdel-Saboor's hero lost all his Hamletian dimensions and defiant, sceptical musings; the Hallaj hatched in Assyout after a lot of hacking away at

the text, was a floppily soppy romantic figure with nothing of the Romantic's typical bravura and virulence. No wonder he was quite at home in the bird's cage set, where the director visually encased him, in the prison scene, and was fittingly crucified in the end on a huge children's kite flapping in the wind. Conciliation rather than provocation seems to have been the motto of the director. Still, it was nice to hear poetry once more spoken from the stage.

"Our revels, now, are ended," said Prospero at the termination of his daughter's illusory wedding festivities, and how I wish I could declare the same! But our Cultural Palaces theatrical revels are all too realistic and are far from "ended". Six more shows remain to be seen.

Alexandria aftermath:
4 th July 1991

Rusty Relics, New Brass

How difficult it is to be fair in the face of mediocrity! Jotting a few notes to help me wrap up my eye-witness account of the Cultural Palaces Contest in Alexandria (a consummation devoutly to be wished), I found myself reliving the whole experience: its rare bright moments, and stifling drudgery. My vitriolic side was stirred. I was seized by an overwhelming vituperative urge which gained momentum as my memories of the Alexandria ordeal merged with more recent ones of yet another Thespian tournament that folllowed close behind, without reprieve, and lasted for seven consecutive nights at the El-Samir Theatre in Cairo. The contestants this time were the 'big' national companies who occupy a higher position in the hierarchy of regional troupes and enjoy bigger budgets. Not that you would have guessed it from the quality of their visiting productions! They were not much better, and, sometimes, even worse, in a garish sort of way, than the productions of the more modest Palaces and much poorer Homes. Mediocrity seemed to be dogging me everywhere!

Braving the two festivals in succession felt like getting a second blow on the head while still reeling and staggering from the first, or

being sucked into a whirlpool when you have just surfaced, in turbulent waters, gasping for breath.

No wonder then my first impluse was either to lash out or hold my tongue. A couple of lines from Othello's final speech, however, timely remembered, changed my mind. "I pray you in your letters," he pleaded, "When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, Speak of them as they are, nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice." Easier said than done; however, no harm in trying and straining, for once, the quality of mercy.

Unlucky deeds may aptly describe most of what was performed in the two above-mentioned events. The value of the theatrical work done in the provinces, however, cannot be solely determined in terms of artistic merit. Even the most carping and niggling of critics and the most delicate of aesthetes will have to concede its importance in airing old texts and new talents. This double-pronged activity has helped keep our theatrical heritage alive on the stage, establishing valuable lines of continuity with the past, and giving the younger generations of writers, artists and theatregoers a sense of tradition and something to build on and rebel against. This dialectical relationship with the past which the four major state theatre companies have dismally failed to maintain, is perhaps, the one most important achievement of the small regional troupes in Egypt. Indeed, I do not know where else a young man or woman can see a live production of Yusuf Idris's famous *World Farce (El-Mahzala El-Ardiyyah),* or any of the other major dramatic works of the sixties or, for that matter, the seventies, let alone the fifties and before. Who else would have given a young writer like Hamdi Abdel-Aziz the chance to try out his dangerously adventurous plays in public, or risked producing high-brow 'literary' texts never attmpted before, like Abdel-Ghaffar Mikkawi's *The Hero* or Farouq Khurshid's *The Tale of a Leader Called Habazlam* (The name is a witty coinage which combines two syncopated words: '*habbaz*' which means to play-act, suggesting a charlatan, and 'zulm'or 'zalim,' meaning oppression or oppressor.)?

It is true that both texts, when transferred from the dusty bookshelves to the stage, have proved dramatically anaemic and verbally ponderous. They are not, however, altogether devoid of theatrical potential.

Both are political satires which use comedy, myth and folktale to prick and explode the traditional Arab concepts of heroism, while the ancient setting and element of fantasy in both provide many opportunities for pageantry and interesting theatrical effects.

None of this, however, materialized in the productions I saw. One was turbid and sluggish and was like wading through a squelch of words, and the other was a medley of incoherent sights and sounds. The massive realistic set Emil Girgis chose for *The Hero* served no other purpose than to dwarf the actors, while the actors' almost uniform sing-song and exaggerated manner in delivering Mikkawi's lines sapped whatever life they possessed.

As for *Habazlam*, director Baha'i El-Mirghani chose a livelier and more spirited approach. Sadly he failed to draw the line between artistic ebullience and total chaos. There was far too much shouting and rushing about- a meaningless expenditure of human energy that left us feeling the actors' exhaustion, not vitality, while the painfully discordant colours of their sweatsoaked garish costumes constantly clashed with the naive tawdry sets that came in rapid succession, making little sense. It was dizzying not dazzling .

I am not defeating my own argument, I hope, by making such harsh criticisms of what I described earlier as laudable ventures. I do not believe in pampering directors. That's like depriving them of vitamin D, and might put them in danger of developing an artistic form of rickets. Criticism should be made and accepted, or at least considered. No true artist has ever been daunted or deterred by a critic.

The point I want to make, briefly, is this; the production of unexplored texts, old and new, may be a risky business for the director and a disappointing experience for an audience. For the potential playwright, however, it is invaluable, whatever kind of reviews he gets. Every dramatist should have the chance to discover his or her self on the stage, of seeing his or her words fleshed out in actors and bodied forth in the rhythms of human speech, of testing the theatrical viability of his or her abstract verbal imaginings before the live many-headed monster called an audience.

Without this gruelling experience, writers could never discover their shortcomings, mature, or fulfill their potential. That is why, in

their fifties and despite many published plays, both Khurshid and Mikkawi have not yet mastered their craft.

Hamdi Abdel-Aziz, on the other hand, though young, has the advantage of having had a few plays performed, which enables him to produce more stageable texts. Both his earlier *What's Happened?*, which walked away with all the prizes at last year's Port Said Festival, and his current *Out of Work and Wedlock*, a romping comedy of present day life in Egypt, deserve a separate article.

The Man and the Mask

For a man who professed to live the life of a recluse and prescribed 'the ivory tower' as the ideal haven for artists, Tawfik El-Hakim has done extremely well publicitywise. Few laymen may have read his books, or may know only the few that were made into films or shown on TV or the stage. Nevertheless, his is a household name, and his face, or rather, faceless media-image, is as familiar as that of a film star or popular cartoon figure.

A few years ago I was introducing a drama class to semiotics. To demonstrate to them that a sign acquired a definite meaning only when it was combined with others in a pattern, I chalked on the board a walking stick. It suggested several meanings. But when I added to the stick a bowler hat, they all chorused "Charlie Chaplin!" When I wiped out the bowler hat and replaced it with a floppy beret, they hailed this simple combination of commonplace objects as Tawfik El-Hakim.

It struck me that our image of El-Hakim as the bereted, mustachioed and shabbily-attired intellectual hermit carrying a stick was an artificial construction, as elaborate as Chaplin's cinematic car-

icature of the vagrant. It was a theatrical mask. Indeed, this expert in the art of self-promotion surpassed Chaplin in some respects: he needed no props, no sets and no supporting actors – that is, apart from his famous, talking donkey, who made his debut in a silent part in the *Diary of a Country Magistrate* (1937) then jumped to the lead in two books that bore his name, *My Donkey Said To Me* (1938) and *El-Hakim's Donkey* (1940).

El-Hakim's mask, too, was more complex and resilient. When its familiar lines deepened over the years, and its newness wore off, fresh lines appeared to add new character facets. By the end of his life, El-Hakim's assiduously cultivated public persona was a veritable gallery of characters from the comic repertoire. His persona combined the Olympian recluse, the witty clown, the misanthrope, the miser, the doddering, kindly patriarch, the scowling misogynist and the buoyant male chauvinist pig who values nothing in a woman but her meat and potato casseroles.

Curiously, this most obviously theatrical of public personalities managed to take in whole generations of critics and scholars. They listened to him reverently and believed his every word. When he pompously declared that he never intended his plays for the stage, but, rather, for a 'theatre of the mind', they jubilantly heralded the birth of a new dramatic genre and christened it 'intellectual theatre'. What a hoax. The man was simply and rather obtusely defending himself, brazening out the charge, not altogether unwarranted, that his plays sometimes lacked life and verve, and sounded more like elaborate debates than dramas. But the ruse worked, and eventually congealed and solidified into a vexing fact of 'critical' life. The obfuscating and rather off-putting epithet 'intellectual' has since clung to El-Hakim's theatre like a leech, sucking away its vitality and humour, and bleeding one production after another dry. The spook he conjured up to awe the critics has also daunted actors and directors and frightened away many a potential audience.

That El-Hakim himself was more theatrical than any of his stage characters, and infinitely more witty, vivid and interesting, may account for the fact that since his death directors have preferred to stage plays about him rather than revive his own.

After all, he was his own best dramatic creation. A few years ago, he starred in a musical at the Balloon Theatre, and was impersonated by the great actor Saad Ardash. More recently, director Abdul-Salam El-Khodari has dragged him once more to the boards and the limelight at the behest of playwright Ahmed Itman (who heads the department of classical languages at Cairo University) to bemoan the erosion of classical values in today's life and art, and, naturally, inveigh against the boulevard theatre the real El-Hakim knew and loved so well, and perhaps, secretly preferred to the literary classical theatre he publicly championed. After all, that was where he got his early apprenticeship and learnt to love the theatre. Didn't he spend his early youth fraternizing with the Okasha brothers and their commercial troupe in the music halls of Emad El-Din before he was dragged away to Paris and the Classics?

Dr. Itman did his best to defend the Greeks and their theatre, using El-Hakim's mask as his mouthpiece. But he committed the singular error of mistaking the mask for the man. Like many candid scholars before him, and many an earnest disciple of the master, he swallowed the bait. But the inherent theatricality of the mask proved irrepressible, and no amount of structural gimmickry could circumvent it.

The formula of the 'play within the play' availed nothing, since we could no more believe in the reality of the El-Hakim projected on the stage than in the reality of the actors he was supposed to be watching. And although Tawfik Abdul-Latif, in the title role, strove hard to invest the mask with a sense of reality, its theatricality defeated him, infecting everything, including his acting, and transformed the play into a travesty of itself.

The sudden arrival of Aristophanes on the scene didn't help matters. As he trundled down a long staircase at the back reaching up to heaven, looking like an out-size angel minus the wings, the play teetered on the edge of farce. He was presumably called in to bolster El-Hakim's (Itman's) plea for a 'serious, respectable' theatre. His short barks and startling acerbic eruptions, however, did more damage than good. He looked and sounded as if he had just walked out of a commercial farce. One wondered why he departed angrily at the end, dragging El-Hakim with him to heaven, when the actors in the 'play within the play' suddenly gave up acting Dr Itman's parody of Aristophanes'

Ecclesiazousae (Women in Parliament) and burst into belly-dancing. It looked as if he would have been quite at home doing that.

Dr Itman's message may not have got through. But it was certainly a hilarious and very entertaining evening.

Studio El-Fann (The Art Studio):
18th July 1991

Softly, Softly!

To make a career in the theatre as an honest straightforward entertainer has recently become wellnigh impossible in Egypt. Ever since the fifties, when politics invaded the stage and installed 'political engagement' as the hall mark of 'good art', simple, uncluttered 'fun' became a dirty word, and the great art of clowning fell into disrepute.

For a while, the private companies resisted the growing trend and continued merrily mining the farcical vein. But a taste for brash political satire has built up over the years, aided and abetted by the persistent absence of real democratic public forums and legitimate venues for free speech. One fine morning the private companies woke up to find that hurling abuse at the 'system' from the stage, and taking off presidents and political figures, was a lucrative business. Politics was suddenly as spicy as sex, and our comedies and farces became increasingly populated by clowns dressing up as political rebels and sinuous spangled belly-dancers masquarading as public agitators!

Not unexpectedly, corruption in high places leapt to the lead as a favourite theme, and has since been worked into a myriad plots. After

all, the presentation of ' high places' allows for varied sumptuous sets, spectacular visual effects, and beautiful girls in revealing, chic or, not infrequently, bizarre outfits, while the dramatization of ' corruption' affords ample pretext for as many salacious episodes and titillating naughty scenes as the director can squeeze in.

A number of songs and dances are usually tacked on willy-nilly, presumably to provide atmosphere, and are sprung, or rather 'loosed', upon the startled audience at the oddest junctures in the plot and in the most absurdly unexpected settings such as court-rooms, police stations and torture cells! As a finishing touch, the star comedians, male and female, and sometimes the whole cast, go over their parts, studding their performances with puns, witticisms and sexual innuendoes and jazzing them up with all the didactic quips and saucily polemical barbs they can think of. The result has been a well-established sloppy formula, and it has unfortunately *worked,* landing many a producer a fortune.

What about the time-hallowed motto then, which is glibly trotted out by the private companies in the face of criticism and which says: 'If it works in the theatre, then it is good'?

The trouble is that 'it', in this case the 'sex-politics-laughter' formula of the commercial theatre, *works* for the wrong people; it also manages, insiduously, to cheapen and marginalize (not to say prostitute) both sex and the political discourse of the opposition. It is no secret that this money-making 'formula' could not have worked were it not for the modest, meager measure of democracy the 'system' has grudgingly granted now, at least in the area of verbal expression. But instead of being really political, in the sense of pushing for more 'real' democracy, this pseudo-political formula produces a depleting counter-effect. Its puerile daring and self-congratulatory 'cheek' work ultimately to reduce the pressure inside the cooking pot, and to propagate the illusion that everything in the garden is rosy.

And look at the audience the commercial formula addresses! Seventy-five percent of them, according to statistics, are not Egyptians anyway, and couldn't care less about our political life; they go there solely to seek the 'flesh-pots' of Egypt, as Joyce's Bloom would call them. The rest belong to those very 'people in high places' who are tickled, and somewhat masochistically flattered by the artists' attention

and the shallow criticism levelled at them, and go home feeling virtuous and not the least bit threatened – as if the fifty pounds they had paid (each) had absolved them of their sins and made them into liberal patrons of the 'serious' theatre.

Galal El-Sharqawi's recent superficially audacious *Softly, Softly* (alternatively, *Go Easy On Us*) at his Arts Theatre (Masrah El-Fann) shows grave symptoms of the 'commercial malady'. The plot had potential; but it was ruthlessly sacrificed at the altar of Mammon. Fashioned on the picaresque model, it had presumably, originally, intended to portray, in a string of humourous episodes, the adventures and forays of two rebellious journalists into the sanctified regions and dominions of the law, the press, the academic halls, the People's Assembly, the underworld drug empires and beggars' kingdoms. The medical profession too was supposed to come in for a sizable chunk of the cake. But look at what El-Sharqawi has made of it! He simply botched it. Hala Sidqi, his *vedette*, a competent and appealing actress with an impressive vocal range, good looks and a wide emotional spectrum, was grotesquely dressed in a garish, flower-printed leotard which became transparent at the whimsical touch of the lighting-board operator. And what with the gigantic orange satin bow adorning her richly endowed and generously revealed chest, and the strip of shiny black cloth tightly encasing her hips, she looked sometimes like a strange, outlandish, gushing clown spouting 'big grown-up words'! Had the play been a burlesque, one would have warmly applauded her excellent spoofing of political jargon; the sad thing, she was in earnest!

As for her fiancé, Mohamed El-Sharqawi, an excellent, though not very bright, comedian, I do not think that he has ever bothered to read any Amnesty International bulletins or reports, let alone experienced a real prison sentence. If he had, he wouldn't have made such a ghastly ghoulish insensitive meal of the rape of male prisoners.

El-Sharqawi's *coup de theatre* was including Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, together with Saddam Hussein, Napoleon and Hitler, among other historical personages in his *dramatis personae*. Armed with grotesque masks and well-mimicked voices, they most inexplicably invade the lunatic asylum, where the journalists have finally landed, to figure as hallucinatory projections of the collective consciousness! One would have forgiven El-Sharqawi this cheap and flagrant trading

in on history had he stuck to his pretentious imaginary guns and made his actors stand up to the mask of Mubarak and tax him as they did Nasser and Sadat.

They didn't. A tribute to the 'age of freedom' finished us off, and squashed the last vestiges of artistic integrity withal.

What won't a man do to make money? was the question I carried home with me that night.

Bull-dozered

In the *Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade tells us of an idiosyncratic sultan who chose, of all animals, an elephant for a pet. Such a fanciful choice of pets is actually not as rare as one might think. The Romans, after all, kept lions as pets and the ancient Egyptians snakes. In England in the late eighteenth century, Lord Byron's uncle, a morose misanthrope, had a passion for crickets and preferred their company to that of humans. Newstead Abbey, his home, literally swarmed with them. His nephew, the great English poet who inherited his title, seems also to have inherited his odd predilections. While at Cambridge, he kept a bear in his rooms. When asked what such a nice animal was doing in a grim place like that, he answered: "Reading for an MA!"

Scheherazade's elephant, however, was not as docile as Byron's scholarly bear. Its interests and pursuits were of a more mundane and lowly order. It simply trampled or devoured whatever came in its way, terrorizing the whole population.

A few years ago that mythical elephant found its way to the stage when the Syrian playwright Sa' dallah Wannus published his one-act play *The Elephant, O King of All Time!* In it Wannus made that gen-

tlest of all gigantic beasts into a symbol of brute force and political oppression. In line with the original anecdote, the play ends in the manner of a sour joke. When a delegation of citizens arrives at the palace to complain about the rapacious pet, they are so awed by the mightiness of the king and his grandeur that they end up asking him to provide a spouse for the elephant to alleviate its loneliness !

More recently, the story's potential for political satire and preaching attracted the Egyptian poet and writer Ahmed Afifi, but instead of an elephant, he chose a bull for his central symbol, and called his play, *We Insist It's a Bull* ... The title is the first part of an Egyptian proverb which goes on to say: 'you insist we milk it !' It is used when people talk at cross. purposes or from contradictory premises; it also denotes stupidity and blindness. In the play, the proverb is dramatised into a confrontation between the king and his bull on the one hand, and the poverty-stricken people on the other. The people see the bull for what it is - an ogre; but the king insists that it is a gift from heaven like the sacred cows of India. In one harangue after another the rebel-leader, Nur (light), urges his submissive people to take up arms and shatter the king's lie. They finally do, though only after three long hours.

Clearly and rather simplistically, the play advocates militant political action by the poor and downtrodden. This, however, does not explain the curious decision of the censor to suppress not the play itself but rather the word 'bull' in the title which for the purposes of this production has been changed to *What shall we say*? One wonders who the censor thought the original title referred to.

Whatever his reasons he need not have bothered. The text is so weak and diluted that it fails to make an impression and could only affect the most superficial and susceptible of minds. The simple fable which in Wannus's hands took only half an hour to unravel and drive its moral home is here stretched out over three hours until its flimsy threads fray and wear very thin. The boredom is exacerbated by the extreme repetitiveness of the dialogue which blunts the edge of all criticism and induces a state of stupor in the audience.

To make up for the flimsiness and textural poverty of the play, director Fahmi El-Kholi used almost every trick in the bag: star performers, excellent choral singing and music, stunning visual effects,

imaginative group formation, comic ad-libbing, bath tubs with real water, semi-nudity, belly-dancing, the lot.

The most impressive aspect of the production, however, was Mohamed El-Si'idi's set: a gigantic but versatile mobile metal construction representing a huge bull's head with horns, mounted high up on poles (presumably the bull's legs), with detachable steps on all sides leading down to the floor of the stage. In this upright position it served as a set for the king's court; turned upside down, with the stairs detached, it formed an abstract set for a public square; lying on is side, it became a humble peasant hut. At the end of every scene, in full view of the audience, the set changes were effected by stage-hands dressed in black, while the actors lined up front in a still tableau and shouted slogans and rousing songs in true agit-prop fashion, usually with clenched fists raised.

Nor was this impressive construction used simply to indicate location. At one point in the second part, it springs to life, advances to the centre of the stage as a real bull to engage in battle with its slaughterer; and as the actor hangs on to it high up, stabbing at the hollow head, it swirls and sways to the sound of drums, in flickering light, achieving perhaps the only dramatic point in the whole evening. It is true that the opening moments of the play and its final scene are visually stirring, one with a gigantic tent swelling in the wind with clouds of smoke floating at the back, the other with a crucified figure dangling in mid-air; these however were more decorative than functional and lacked dramatic impact.

The costumes, too, contributed to the visual harmony of the production with well-chosen fabrics and colours. The motif of the bull's horns was echoed not only in the few abstract portals, but also in the headgear of the king and the helmets and spears of his guards. The bull was everywhere.

In retrospect, what remains of the show is a few impressive and stirring images, some good singing, and some competent acting. The rest was political waffle and verbal mess.

The Floating Children's Theatre, Giza :
1st Aug. 1991

Boys and Girls Come Out to Play!

For nearly a hundred years, the children of Egypt remained theatrically deprived. School drama, of course, has been with us for long; and the traditional street puppet and peep-shows, and the shadow-play, even longer. School drama, however, specially the heavily moralistic and dry declamatory type, does not rank as children's theatre proper. The popular street shows, on the other hand, are traditionally designed for a mixed audience and not strictly for children. While children may enjoy the slapstick element and the rough-and-tumble, knock-about sequences, the subject matter is usually far removed from their interests. Moreover, when the art of puppetry (which dates back to the 14th century) gradually lost its adult patrons with the advent of live shows and the western-style professional theatre towards the end of the 19th century, children found themselves completely uncatered for.

Children had to wait until 1950 when director Salah Al-Saqqah, just returned from Moscow where he studied the art of puppetry, and the famous forties comedian 'Shukuku' joined hands to launch the first private children's theatre in Cairo and the Arab world. But though they chose the central Azbakiyya Gardens as the site of their theatre, the project soon foundered due to lack of funds, and after just one season, the theatre closed down.

Al-Saqqah had teamed up with the wrong man; 'Shukuku' who had built his fame and popularity in the forties on assuming the garb and character of 'Qaraqoz', the traditional hero of the puppet show, with its characteristic 'tartoor' or fool's cap, was a comedian on the wane, fast slipping into oblivion.

The following year, the state stepped in and founded the first fully state-funded puppet theatre in the Arab world. Al-Saqqah was chosen to lead the enterprise and has since managed it with skill and competence. Three years later, a state-sponsored children's theatre troupe was established; but, unlike its puppeteering counterpart, it survived only for three years, and was disbanded in 1966. In 1979, the Puppet Theatre made a brave effort to revive the idea of live children's performances as a branch of its activities, but it was not until 1981 that a permanent, independent children's theatre was established under the name of The National Egyptian Children's Theatre (NECT).

Around the same time, a National Children's Cultural Centre was created and has since played a substantial role, besides its documentation and research activities, in commissioning new plays, sponsoring productions, and encouraging well-known playwrights to write for children. (For more details about the history of children's entertainment in Egypt, I refer the reader to Mr. Samir Awad, of the National Egyptian Theatre Centre, who has generously put his time, vast knowledge and resources at my disposal.)

Recently, the National Children's Centre and the Children's Theatre have collaborated to mount a summer theatre festival featuring Five of their choicest productions. It opened last week at the Floating Theatre in Giza (at the tip of the University Bridge) and will carry on through August, with the shows taking turns at going on tour in the provinces and coastal resorts.

On the opening night I bumped into Shawqi Khamis, the current head of NECT.

- "Variety is our goal, and availability," he responded to a question about policies.

- "We try to cater for as many age groups as possible and offer them a variety of items to choose from. Of course, children's theatre is generally educational", he admitted," and also didactic. But in the very broadest sense of the word," he hastened to add.

-"The kids come here primarily for fun; but we try to squeeze in some benefit. We realize that we have to stimulate their imagination and arouse their curiosity and sense of wonder if they are to listen to us at all. But once we have done that, we try to teach them something about the world they live in, and perhaps, even train them into some form of political awareness. *The Children in Parliament* is a case in point: it is a parody of Aristophanes's *Women in Parliament*, but with a very serious intent. It does not ridicule children as Aristophanes ridiculed women; it is basically a lesson in democracy and human rights. Come and see it".

Mr. Khamis is full of hopes and dreams; his enthusiasm, however, is frequently dampened by the vicissitudes of artistic production in Egypt.

-"We suffer from a chronic lack of financial backing. They," presumably the government, "don't think children are important enough. Our present home in the Metropole Theatre is ramshackle and in a terrible state of repair. Our offices are more like stiflingly crowded burrows. There is no place where you can make a cup of coffee. We have to rely on the next-door cafe if we have guests and apologize for the quality and tepidness of the beverages. But that is nothing compared to the biggest calamity of all: the loos! They are unfit for human use. I get many visitors, specially from the Arab world. They hear about our theatre; it is the only one of its kind in the Arab world, and people want to learn from us. They come expecting prestige, a grand edifice, facilities, impressive equipments, studios, rehearsal rooms. They do not find anything of the kind, and it hurts me to see disappointment written all over their faces. But I do not think I can bear to let them see our loos. All the time they are here I keep praying they do not ask to go to the toilet".

At this point Mr. Khamis's dark complexion deepened mounrfully, and in the growing dusk, it eerily seemed to dissolve into the bright glow of his yellow sweat suit. For a moment, the metaphor of the invisible man behind the scenes threatened to become real.

-"If only they would give us some of the money and attention they are lavishing on the Reading For All Project! There are children who are illiterate and will remain illiterate. We could do something for those,"he added wistfully.

To take his mind off loos and funds, I moved to what I thought would be a more cheerful subject.

-"When the first pan-Arab children's theatre convention was held in 1988, you declared that it would be a bi-yearly affair. What happened?!"

-"The Gulf war happened, and a change of governors. The new governor of Suez is not exactly overjoyed at the prospect of spending so much money over some noisome voteless brats – in his view of course. We are still trying and shopping around for a sponsor."

His eyes suddenly brightened. "It was a magnificent event, even though the press did not give it proper coverage. There were shows from all over the Arab world and serious seminars. We came up with a lot of ideas, but, again," his voice tapered off sadly, "there is the question of money!"

It was time to go. The lights had dimmed and risen three times. The show was about to start.

Tom Thumb, which opened the festival, was originally produced as part of a drama-in-education programme for fifth year primary school kids. It is about bees and their kingdom. But instead of a grown up teacher reeling off dry information with the aid of lifeless stills and drab drawings, which in many cases look to children like incomprehensible squiggles, a boy of ten is granted a fantastic wish and transformed into another Tom Thumb to enact a journey into the land of bees. The stage space becomes a dream world where boys and girls can suddenly shrink and dwindle into rag dolls and puppets. The action of the play involves a flight on the back of a butterfly; a battle with an army of vicious wasps; a short sojourn in the hospitable court of a queen bee, including a guided tour of the kingdom, then a flight on the back of a pigeon out of the kingdom. The children are supposed to imbibe the information relayed without noticing it; and to make sure that this has been achieved, the actors have a talking session with them after the show.

As it stands, the show is adequate for its purpose as far as the general conception goes. But in terms of execution, it leaves a lot to be desired. Most of the action involving the puppets, for instance, and which constitutes nearly two thirds of the play, is relegated to the back

of the stage, which weakens its effect and causes the attention of many a child to wander. Some way round this difficulty could surely be found. More imagination too could go into the dramatization of the educational bits to make them more lively and give them more visual substance, and more care should be spent over the quality of sound.

The Fox, which followed, used the same set with a few alterations – a testimony at once of the poverty and resourcefulness of the NECT artists. Plenty of talent however was in evidence, with a new set of well-trained children. Where do they all come from?

-"There was a small add in the paper," said the farmer's daughter of the fable, whom I waylaid after the show. She was in the company of the fox, the wolf, and the owl -- the foes of the farmyard animals. The dog, the dramatic hero and star of the show, was a veteran actor and lost his breath mid-way, sweating profusely and occasionally relieving himself of his furry mask. It was obvious he could not cope with the vitality and ardent vivacity of his young partners.

-"Sixteen," she said when I asked her age.

-"I have been with the company for years. We get singing and dancing lessons, real ballet. Some of us leave after a while to pursue other professions. But some decide to make the theatre their career and join the conservatoire, the ballet institute, or the institute of theatre arts."

-"Where do you train all these kids?" I asked Mr. Khamis.

-"Wherever we can. Mind you, our theatre has been unfit for public performances for a long time We used it as a rehearsal and coaching area."

I wondered how the young primadonna of *The Fox* joined the theatre.

-"Of course I knew Uncle Shawqi through my father before I joined, and I love working with him." Others, however, had not known Uncle Shawqi beforehand. The girl who led the chorus in *Tom Thumb* was originally a juvenile professional singer in discos.

-"We do not mind where they come from so long as they are young, talented, unspoilt and literate. They also have to be willing to learn."

By now the garden was nearly empty.

-"I hope you will be with us until the end of the festival. Most critics think it is child's play," he said as we were shaking hands.

-"Indeed I shall. The French thought one of your performances worth a first prize in Bordeaux. And I am looking forward to *The Bird of Paradise* and *Children in Parliament*."

The Floating Children's Theatre, Giza:
8th Aug. 1991

The Spell of the Well

When *The Magic Well* opened last year at El-Gomhouriya Theatre it drew large audiences but little critical attention. A few months later, however, the same show made the headlines when it scooped the top award at the Bordeaux Children's Theatre Festival (3-23 December, 1990); and considering the brief history and fluctuating fortunes of children's theatre in Egypt, it was no mean achievement.

The play, which is currently taking part in the Children's Theatre Festival, is based on a folk tale which seems universal; I had read it as a child before I came upon it, years later, in a slightly different version, in George Peele's folk drama *An Old Wives' Tale (1590)*. The appeal of the show, however, does not simply consist in the charming and familiar tale of the two – one good and one wicked – sisters and their contrasting fortunes, nor in the haunting incantations of the witch over the well, which produce the thrilling events of covering one with corn and gold, and the other with lice and cockroaches. It derives substantially from the intelligent dramatic adaptation and the overtly and humorously theatrical mode of staging.

The production manages to relate the world of fantasy to the world of popular street entertainment by presenting the story in the

form of a peep-show run by a cranky muddled man and a young blithe female assistant. The performance begins with a song and dance announcing the arrival of the peep-show and exhorting the children to gather round. The peep-show box, however, which occupies the centre of the stage, opens, forming an actor's dressing - room cluttered with costumes, masks and other props, and the action swings forward.

The spirit of play-acting, of a romping children's game, is maintained throughout with the performers assuming one character after another and changing their costumes, sometimes with feigned awkwardness, in full view of their chuckling young viewers who are themselves connoisseurs of the pleasures of masquerading. The children are encouraged to participate in the show by helping the actors when the need arises, which is often. The good girl, willing but weak, is constantly in need of help; and in the lonely forest who is there to assist her but the children? At one point, for example, she hears a fruit-laden orange tree groaning under its burden and turns pleadingly to the children, whereupon they rush up in large numbers and scamper onto the stage squealing with excitement. Disaster, we gasp! But the adroit, energetic assistant, Lubna Wanas, more than copes. We relax and are treated to a refreshing melange of spontaneity, art and artistry.

Audience participation, in one degree or another, is, of course, a constant feature of all children's shows. In Husam Atta's productions, however, it cuts a high profile and is usually interwoven into the action. In his latest production for the Children's Centre in Assiout, *Your Elephant, O King of All Time!*, the children are called upon to interfere when the villagers, who go to complain to the king, are suddenly struck dumb with awe. The result is a children's demonstration on the stage - an early lesson in democracy and standing up for one's rights. So far, Atta seems to have dedicated himself to children's theatre. One reason may be that he is still a very young man with clear memories of what it feels like to be a child, another is, perhaps, that as a child, he regularly took part in the children's dramatic activities at the cultural centre of his home-town, Assiout. To that early training-ground he is still very loyal. He has done many productions there, of which the *Elephant* was the latest.

The credit Atta won in Bordeaux is not simply a personal victory, as he himself admits. It is, in essence, a tribute to the efforts and many sacrifices of a long line of writers and artists who have worked hard

since the fifties to establish a proper children's theatre in Egypt. "Without them, I simply would not be here," Atta says. "Maybe the state will now give us more money, and the media more attention," he hopes. And so do we.

The Floating Theatre, Giza:
15th Aug. 1991

Child Abuse

If you have read last Thursday's harrowing feature, "Fighting for life on the streets of Cairo", you will understand my shock and dismay when on the same evening I found the tragedy of those very children burlesqued and cheaply vulgarised by one of Egypt's leading state theatre companies.

I had criticised the private theatres' tendency to rope in political themes for purely sensational and commercial ends. Now it seems that the spirit of ruthless and vulgar commercialism has also infected the state companies.

The Comedy's latest production, *Love Dormitory*, at the Floating Theatre in Giza, is nothing short of scandalous.

The ironic thing was that I had gone to the Floating Theatre looking for mental and emotional relief. I badly needed to see some fortunate and carefree children enjoying themselves. Watching *Children in Parliament or The Bird of Paradise* might, I thought, help blot out, or at least blur, the bleak and gruesome image of childhood so vividly outlined in Essam El-Din's article.

The Bird of Paradise, however, had gone on tour, together with *Tom Thumb* and *The Fox*. The only children's show available was *The Magic Well* which I had already seen three times. As for *Children in Parliament,* which I had been so looking forward to, it was still in rehearsal; they couldn't get together the old cast, I was told, and had to make a lot of replacements. Across the dry patchy lawn the lights were up at the big theatre. I stepped over, lured by the prospect of a cheerful musical comedy, as the ads had said, with 20 children in the cast.

Instead of an honest farce or a light-hearted musical, however, we were treated to over three and a half hours of sloppy, shameless rehash of stock melodramatic themes and sentimental cliches. But most offensive of all was the outrageous abuse and vulgarisation of children's talents (making them into apeing morons, grotesque belly-dancers and circus animals), and their unconscionable exploitation in order to dilute and finally explode the child-care issue in Egypt and propagate the facile hypocritical thesis that a little sympathy cures all.

More than sympathy, or a little charity, is needed to rescue Cairo's disadvantaged youngsters from the rubbish-dumps of society – the reformatories, detention centres, or dens of beggars, thieves and drug addicts. What was so vexing about Atef El-Nimr's script was that it fitfully betrayed an awareness of this. It even went so far as to question, in the general outline of the plot, the patriarchal structure of society and its symbols of authority – fathers, teachers, doctors, school warders, social workers, inspectors and the law.

At the heart of the play is a dual confrontation between male and female, adult and child. It is no coincidence that the youngsters in the play are all female, and all are oppressed and exploited by male authority.

The confrontation, however, whether due to the author's inexperience (this is only his second play), the formula of the light-hearted comedy, or the director's management of the text, soon got diluted and lost its edge.

Rather than develop or unfold, it dissolved into a series of stock farcical sketches, melodramatic twists and outbursts, mushy sentimental scenes, rounds of vulgar repartee and a plethora of songs and dances hastily scrambled together.

The final impression was of a show extremely bumpy and deeply split. It moved in jerks, jolting the audience into irreconcilable moods and failing ultimately to make up its mind about what it wanted to say or whom it was addressing. Seeking at once to be rebellious and conciliatory, it fell between two stools. The result was a lot of bruises on all sides.

Leaving the theatre at 2.15 am, I couldn't help thinking of all the theoretical laws and moral safeguards governing the employment of children and wondering whether those juvenile performers were properly fed and paid. And another question entered my mind: what hope of self-respect can our children have if we feed them such shoddy hypocritical stuff at such an early age?

Youth Care Council's Theatre, Cairo:
22nd Aug.1991

Conquerors and Traitors

Like Traitors' Gate in the Tower of London, Conquerors' Gate is a real gate in old Cairo, known in Arabic as Bab El-Futuh. Mahmoud Diab's *Bab El-Futuh*, however, is a symbolic one and has nothing to do with Cairo. The play is set for the most part in Palestine during the Crusades. After the opening scene, which is more in the nature of a prologue, and which in set in the present in some unspecified Arab country, group of students who have been discussing the roots of the current Arab political malaise decide to re-enact history. Having established the basic dialectical formula of play-within-a-play, the action moves back in time to the reign of Salaheddin El-Ayyubi and his famous conquests in Palestine.

In the following scene, Salaheddin has just beaten the Crusaders at the gates of Jerusalem and entered the city, when a traveller arrives from distant Andalusia (then under Arab rule) to deliver a book into the hands of the conqueror. He spends the rest of the play trying to see him but to no avail; his efforts are constantly aborted by the sultan's men, his soldiers, his official and pedantic historian, his chief of guards and the rich merchants of the city who are in league with them. Throughout the play, the sultan, who engages most of the dialogue and

seems to haunt the place and control everybody's life, remains in the wings like some hidden god securely out of reach and out of touch.

As the traveller's frustration mounts, a pointed sense of urgency builds up around his task, and the book he carries grows in importance, finally becoming something of a holy gospel. The book, however, which is entitled Bab El-Futuh, has nothing to do with religion; it propounds, as we discover from the excerpts read out on stage, a political doctrine based on social justice, democracy and human rights. This doctrine, Diab asserts through his mythical traveller, is the only gate to victory and without it all Salaheddin's conquests will avail him nothing. This is the lesson the chorus of students learn from their voyage into history.

It was also, of course, a veiled message to Nasser after the 1967 defeat and a bitterly ironical admonition. Like Salaheddin who had founded the most powerful Muslim state in the world at the time, and who had won Jersualem but failed to secure it, Nasser, in Diab's view, had also failed to bolster his military takeover with political legitimacy and the rule of law. The military became absolute rulers, crushing all dissent and running the country as if it was a semi-feudal family federation of the Ayyubid brand. The result, the play argues, was the 1967 defeat and the loss of Sinai among other Arab territories.

By the end of the play, the glorious conquerors have all been exposed as tyrants and traitors. No wonder that the play, which was written in the aftermath of the 1967 disaster, was banned, together with a host of others running on the same theme. It received its first public performance at the hands of director Saad Ardash in the seventies, in the first flush of the 1973 victory and Sadat's short honeymoon with the intellectuals.

Once more, Saad Ardash was behind *Bab El-Futuh* in the present, much-curtailed production, and he conducted it in the same austere Brechtian style as the previous one. The cast did a fair job, performing adequately, if not brilliantly. Talent was in evidence, but also a lack of training and craftsmanship. This is perhaps what prompted the energetic, ever-enthusiastic Ardash to suggest to the Tanta University authorities that they set up a permanent theatre workshop which he volunteered to run. Let us hope it materialises.

The production obviously won first prize in the Universities' annual contest on the strength of the chosen script and the direction. Diab, who sadly died in his forties nearly a decade ago, was a brilliant and daring writer, though not as fertile as some of his contemporaries. His short, dramatic career which started in 1964 with *The Old House* (a bourgeois drama about social climbing) produced less than 10 plays, most of them in oneact. His merit, however, is not reflected in the number of his plays, and rests mainly on his 'peasant' dramas. His first was *The Storm,* in 1966, which brought him instant fame and recognition and was widely performed on improvised stages in the provinces. Encouraged by the success, and feeling "charged with the responsibility of presenting the theatre with the picture of the peasant as a human being," as he once declared in an interview, he went on to write another peasant drama, *Harvest Nights* (1967), in which he tried his hand at the play-within-a play technique. He received further acclaim and it is possible that Diab intended to further plough the genre he had developed, and introduce into it other daring technical innovations; but the 1967 defeat deflected his dramatic course. Describing its impact on him, he said : " The setback (*naksa*) was a fearful blow which made me lose all sense of reason. I was quite unable to write anything. The feelings I had were simply too forceful to put down or reflect in a work of art. However I am sure that I will start writing again - and about these particular events – when their impact begins to lessen." And he did. The pain and shock were transmuted into art in *Bab El-Futuh,* a daring epic work of grand proportions. It was at once his most ambitious and last full-length work .

If the Tanta University production had done nothing but remind us of the achievements of this much neglected and scarcely performed writer, it would still have been quite well worth it. As it is, it did more, acquitting itself creditably and with honour.

The Cosmos Theatre:
29th Aug.1991

The Butcher, the Baker and the Candlestick Maker

At last a show without tatty songs, tacky coarse dances and verbal smut! *My Wife, So to Speak*, the first theatre venture of the newly-formed Nile Company (at The Cosmos in Emad El-Din Street), quite unexpectedly, turned out to be vastly different from the run-of-the-mill commercial entertainment usually offered. Mustafa Saad's script and Mahmoud Abu-Dawoud's direction give us a tidy, unpretentious and relatively elegant sitcom of the Ayckbourn variety, albeit without the technical brilliance and ingenuity of the typical Ayckbourn. Nevertheless, the play has enough wit and hilarity to make up for the lack of technical inventiveness, and its taut structure, strict verbal economy and fast pace rescue it from the common maladies of artistic flabbiness and stifling over-lengthiness.

More surprising still is the subtle political metaphor that, almost imperceptibly and unselfconsciously, unfolds as the play progresses. Its matrix is the baker (played by Mohamed Awad) who strikes us first as a minor, marginal character whose sole function is to supply cakes for the butcher's party. The butcher (Fou'ad El-Muhandis), on the other hand, is only metaphorically so; realistically, he is a ruthless, soulless businessman, a typical specimen of the unscrupulous financial up-

starts and charlatans of the *laisser-faire* seventies. In the violent conjugal row which opens the play, sending it off to a rousing start, we learn, amidst a lot of whizzing plates, flying saucers and crashing cups, that his way of life has driven his wife (Shwikar) to the brink of insanity and near despair. Her loneliness, in her sumptuous gilded cage of a home, is excruciating and she feels, sexually and emotionally, severely deprived. The husband's impotence, despite his riches, is strongly hinted at: 15 years of marriage have failed to deliver the child she has long pined for.

The relation between the husband's impotence, his money-making, or, rather, money-grabbing career, and the political milieu of the seventies begins to come into focus when, suddenly, in the following scene, the wife, now apparently completely off her rocker, bursts out of her room dressed like a 12-year-old, complete with hair ribbons. She claims the startled baker, who has just arrived, as her father while denying any knowledge of the husband. Completely befuddled, the metaphorical butcher calls in the metaphorical candlestick-maker to light up the mystery. He arrives in the realistic guise of a psychiatrist, significantly dressed in white, and explains that the wife has taken a leap into the happy past to flee the dreary present. That happy past is located in the swinging sixties. Very soon, he warns, she will move on to her student days and start going to university all over again.

It was at university that she met, loved and married her present husband. But in those distant days he was a very different man. He was a joyous free soul, an anti-establishment rebel; in short, a hippie! To save his wife, the husband is advised to regress in his turn; in other words, to cast off his present character as butcher, at least for a while, and recover something of his former self and values. This entails a change of costume and behaviour which generates a series of misunderstandings and light spots for the rest of the play, and, needless to say, a lot of hilarity. For the present, however, what strikes us is the light these revelations shed on the baker (he is a *halawani* by name and profession), and the low-key political significance he takes on.

In contrast to the greedy venal butcher, he seems to represent an older system of values and a healthier way of life; and when the wife, in her rejection of the present and regression to the sixties, forcibly adopts him as a parent, he becomes solidly identified with that period

and all it represents. The period, in turn, is linked through his name and profession to an old popular ballad and becomes identified with all that is positive, beautiful and authentic in the Egyptian character. It was a baker and sweet-maker, the ballad says, who first built Cairo; and in the course of the play Mr Halawani, who starts off as a seemingly insignificant character, manages to acquire something of the stature of that axiomatic builder-cum-confectioner. His trade, on the realistic level, may seem accidental; as far as the plot is concerned, he could have been a plumber or an electrician. Metaphorically, however, it is inevitable, and a key to the subtle political message of the play.

Being a comedy, the play had to have a happy ending. The wife, it transpires, was only shamming and was in cahoots with the doctor and the baker. Too predictable, perhaps, but a well-guarded secret until the final scene. Predictably, too, the husband comes to see the error of his ways and reforms. And if he is happy embracing his wife in the midst of the debris of his shattered career, who are we to complain?

Dawoud's direction was clean, uncluttered and well-tailored to the requirements of the genre in which he was working. He spared us the messy mixing of modes, the sloppy tawdriness and the garish gaudiness of the typical cheap commercial show. Slapstick and caricature were there, but in carefully measured doses and only in the scenes that can tolerate them, or indeed, may require them. His major achievement, however, was in controlling his actors and protecting his production from the witless onslaughts and fatuous ravages of their ad-libbing impulses and improvisations. It could not have been easy, given the cast of veteran comedians he worked with. His relative youth and the fact that this was his first foray into the private sector must have added to his problems. But he stuck to his guns and insisted that his actors re-learn that long-neglected and nearly-forgotten thing called 'discipline'. And it paid off. Indeed, the dividends were immense: for the show as a whole, which scores very high on tempo, but primarily for the actors.

I do not remember the last time Awad (as the baker) gave such a warm, frothy and cliche-free performance. In play after play, he seemed to be getting more and more bogged down in his dull, faded routines, and drab repertoire of sounds and gestures. Abu Dawoud cleared away all that drywood and rubbish, revealing the real timbre of Mr Awad's talent and giving him a new lease of life.

This is even more true in the case of the famous sixties comic duo, the immensely gifted and once brilliant El-Muhandis, and his protegé, pupil and ex-wife, Shwikar. When they broke up maritally and artistically after a long time partnership neither could individually achieve the scintillating popular success they once jointly had. Shwikar turned to serious acting in films, achieving a modicum of success, while El-Muhandis, after floundering about for a while, turned to children's programmes on TV, and seemed to reconcile himself to the idea that his best days as a comedian were over.

A year ago, an attempt was made to bring the couple back to the stage in the hope of cashing in on their former popularity. The company, however, a private one and careful of its money, would not risk having them as the sole attraction. A box-office name was needed and they were given supporting roles to filmstar Poussi. *Rawhiyya Itkthatafit* (Rawhiyya has been kidnapped) was the result, and it backfired, causing a lot of artistic and financial embarrassment on all sides. El-Muhandis and Shwikar had played second fiddle and compromised their names and history for nothing.

A few months later, however, the couple, seemingly undaunted by their previous failure, or, perhaps, in a fit of bravado, accepted the challenge of taking on a play single-handedly, or nearly so. At the last minute, however, Dawoud tells me, they got cold feet and started pressing him to introduce some added attractions like a belly-dancer plus a few songs. He adamantly refused. What these two comedians needed, he believed, were good, spacious parts where their talents could breathe, unfold and expand, He was right. Under his strict unrelenting eye, the duo gave one of their best, firmest and funniest performances for years, and gave us a welcome taste of the vintage elegant farces of the sixties.

the Opera House:
1st Sept. 1991

Theatre Fever Hits Town

***The Opening of the Cairo International Festival for Experimental* Theatre**

Lear Represents Egypt

The Avant-garde Theatre's recent production of *King Lear* by director Mohamed Abdel-Hadi has been chosen by the viewing committee of the festival to represent Egypt as a contestant for the festival's varied awards. The show, on Karam Mutawi's advice, has been adumbrated to one and a half instead of two and a half hours. Whether such adumbration will affect it technically or reduce its impact remains to be seen. The committee, however, has seen it in its shortened version and declared itself satisfied. According to its written report, the production scores high on its original conception. A close competitor was the National Theatre's production of Durrenmat's *Let's play Strindberg* (rendered as *The Crazy Dance* by director. Abu-Bakr Khalid). The production, however, despite its discipline, technical competence and a brilliant performance by actor Zein Nassar and a very good one from actress Nada, was sadly lacking in originality, according to the committee. The strange thing is that as the host country, Egypt had the right to participate with two shows; but mysterious directions from "above" insisted that the committee choose only one!

Egypt is not, by the way, the only country in this festival to compete with a production based on a foreign text: The US is bringing *Electra*, France, *Ajax*, Hungary, Plautus's *Miles Gloriosus*, Morocco, Lorca's *Yerma*, Syria, Dario Fo's *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and so on. It is as if voyaging into the unknown, as experimentation is sometimes described, somehow, and paradoxically, strengthens one's ties with the past, and drives the artists to anchor themselves firmly into the traditional and familiar. Greece, of course, does not have to go far in order to reach back to an established dramatic tradition; from their rich storehouse of drama, they have aired out Sophocles's *Philoctetes*, given it a new interpretation and an impressive set, and brought it over to be performed in another historical setting at the Sphinx Open-Air Theatre.

Lacklustre Opening

A dull and heavy evening. Thoroughly boring. That is how many people described the opening night of the festival. And they were not being unfair. It was well-organised, no doubt, but too many armoured trucks and security men (Mrs Mubarak was there), and too much obtrusive officialdom, as well as the heavy sight of all those jackets and ties in the stifling heat of the foyer in the interval (the Opera still insists on formal dress, even when the occasion is by definition one of revolt). All these factors depressed and dampened the spirits of all present. Most depressing of all, however, was the conspicuous absence of the majority of the great actors and actresses of the Egyptian theatre and the dearth of star quality in those who came. Due to administrative incompetence and nepotism, a lot of invitations failed to reach their destination, or so we were told. But, whatever the reason, the end result of that failure was aborting one of the basic functions of the opening night, which is getting people together and creating for them the atmosphere and opportunities to get acquainted. In the short interval, many kept to their seats for fear of losing them since they were neither numbered nor individually assigned. The wisdom of their decision dawned upon me when I walked back into the auditorium, having barely finished the coffee I had long queued for, to find my seat usurped. I had to see the second part of the evening standing up. No choice. I could not even leave. The doors were closed - security reasons. I came out of the Experimental Theatre's opening night with

swollen, overblown, sore and inflated varicose veins. Nothing experimental about that.

The artistic fare: A Game and a Hymn

Mohamed Mansour's dance-theatre, wordless *Game* was the first item. It still seemed impressive and exciting, albeit somewhat shrivelled and shrunk on the much larger stage of the Opera's big hall. Some actors had left, and the new ones who took their place were not yet quite at home in the show. Slightly muddled and a lot diminished is how it struck me.

Intisar Abdel-Fattah's *Hymn*, on the other hand, was well-integrated and perfectly timed, with the director himself on the stage keeping time on a metal washing tub and wielding other weird, quaint, primitive and improvised musical and percussion instruments. (Intisar originally trained as a musician and is a graduate of the Egyptian Conservatoire). Life in death and death in life, that age-old pagan cyclical paradox, was the theme which framed the show and formulated its details. Awatif Hilmi, with her strong, earthy voice, provided Nubian mourning chants and Upper Egyptian lamentation at calculated intervals, while assuming a squatting pose in front of two rows of a squatting chorus. Black was the dominant colour and the sitting figures were strongly reminiscent of some ancient Egyptian statues. The indigenous mood, however, was soon adulterated and infiltrated by Greek, African and even, according to one critic, Japanese echoes. The mixing may have been deliberate, but what disturbed me most was the predominant reliance on classical ballet in the narrative and illustrative sequences. It seemed, somehow, outrageously out of place in the vocal and visual atmosphere created by the primitive chants and symbols. The production also disturbingly echoed back to Intisar's first production El-*Darabokka*, which first brought him into the limelight as a promising experimental artist in theatre. When I saw that tin washing-tub, I kept getting visions of the heroine of *El-Darabokka*, who was also obsessed with death and birth, holding it up against her face and screaming into it. That former heroine, however, was no classical ballet dancer; every move and gesture of hers could be traced back to some indigenous roots and old practices.

Whom are we trying to impress? asked one of my most rebellious and inquisitive students at the Academy of Arts; the Europeans and Americans? The oil-rich Arabs (easily brow-beaten), or the government? And who are they kidding? she bawled most embarrassingly aloud. I had no answer.

El-Tali'a (the Avant-garde theatre) :
5th Sept. 1991

The Philosopher's Stone

To transform base metal into gold has been the dream, not only of the deluded, hairbrained alchemists and philosophers of the middle ages, but also of the sober, sedate, and rational thinkers of humanity all down the line from the ancient Egyptian and Greek civilizations to A.N. Whitehead, Bertrand Russell, Sartre and the whole of the modern age.

For us, the philosopher's stone has become a metaphor for that magical path between reality and the dream of Utopia, And, significantly, it is down that path, and that path alone, that philosophers could establish a link and conduct a dialogue with the common man. Wisdom, for the ancient Egyptian, was no cerebral affair imprisoned in abstract theory; it was concretely practised in the field, on the building site, in the temple and the rites of birth and death. In Greece, likewise, philosophy was available in the market-place and hawked from street corners. Socrates, the progenitor of all philosophers, distrusted the written word, which removes wisdom from its dialectical historical situation and places it into an absolutist, ahistorical context. Divorced from politics, the power-struggle, and the daily transactions of the community and life on the streets, wisdom would be fetishized into a

soulless, tyrannical establishment that heeds the letter rather than the spirit of the law.

Something of this was in Hamid Ibrahim's mind when he decide to tackle a Greek theme and chose to transmit his message of political protest through the figure of that archetypal sage, Socrates. The choice was a refreshing change from the almost claustrophobic obsession with the incestuous figure of Oedipus which has haunted, or rather, bedevilled all treatments of Greek themes in the Egyptian theatre. Indeed, all such treatments can be summed up in four variations on the Oedipus tragedy supplied, in succession, by Ahmad Bakatheer, Tawfiq El-Hakim, Ali Salem (who opted for a comic treatment) and Fawzi Fahmi in his *The Return of the Native*, or, more literally, of the *Absent*. Apart from the Oedipus theme, which had behind it the full force of Taha Hussein's translation, academic support and critical championing, the only other Greek figure that has obtained a foothold in the Egyptian theatre is Aristophanes's Braksa in El-Hakim's new treatment of *The Parliament of Women*.

Mr. Ibrahim's choice of the philosopher as hero is certainly new and daring, considering the little dramatic potential that such wise figures usually have. His dramatic treatment of that figure, however, was not simply traditional and uniformly one-sided (as the representative and undiluted symbol of good *per se*) ; it was almost nonexistent. He is physically present only at the beginning and the end; but apart from that and for the rest of the play, he is conspicuous by his absence, providing some sort of hazy intellectual ambience.

Political intrigue engages the centre of the action against this philosophical backdrop and is joined with sexual intrigue. Pericles's lust for absolute power extends from politics, economics and military conquests to the sexual invasion and subordination of his chief of armies' wife. True to the spirit of classical political intrigue, the wife, a Spartan captive princess, engages in counter-intrigue and proves their undoing. His subjects, meanwhile, inflamed by the teachings of Socrates , are plotting for his downfall. His assassination at the hands of a rebel coincides with the invasion and subordination of Athens by the Spartans (through the treacherous machinations of the Spartan princess Absalia, mistress of Pericles and wife of his chief of staff).The synchronization of the closing events leaves one in no doubt as to the real, contemporary implications of the text, or to the real personage

craftily swaddled in the figurative historical robes of Pericles. Sadat is indicated all down the line and the October victory is subjected to a gruelling investigation concluding with a double-edged negative verdict: military victory is hollow in the presence of tyranny and democracy is hollow in the presence of hunger.

Director Abu Bakr Khaled (who in a sudden burst of creative energy, after a long lazy spell, has given us this show immediately after his impressive *Crazy Dance* at the National Upstairs) tailored his production along these lines. Sound, movement, acting, lighting and stage-design were put in the service of the general objective which was to try and burst the myth of the benevolent dictator and military hero.

Towards this end too, Abu Bakr did a lot of cutting of the original text, which is quite extensive, running into nearly two hundred pages, producing a much adumbrated and more compact version. He also introduced a concrete theatrical link between present-day Cairo and old Athens, in the figure of a drunkard, in modern dress, who fitfully strays on the scene as a dazed, bemused spectator, and finally reveals himself as the eternal citizen of all autocracies, modern and historical, before he flies off the handle, stripping nude. That small part was a wonderful contribution from the director and was ably and delightfully acted by Abdul Sattar El-Khodary in a manner very reminiscent of the great Woody Allen.

The director's severe economy in adapting the text for the stage extended to all aspects of the production. The uniform stage-set consisted of nothing but dark blue drapes and a copper-coloured, suggestively Romanesque, revolving circular structure; it served as a versatile, volatile symbol, sometimes representing the yoke and grindstone of tyranny, sometimes the seat of wisdom, or, more simply, a dialectical, debating area. Mr. Kahlid also showed great economy and thrift in the manipulation of his extras, making them double, and sometimes treble or quadruple, as soldiers, senators, plebians and Socratic disciples, and in every case carefully and beautifully choreographing their movement, eliminating excess and clutter. The choreographic imagination of the director, however, reached its zenith in the fencing match between Pericles and his political and sexual rival Cretias. Speech and movement here were so deftly orchestrated as to convey all the lethal undercurrents of the seemingly sporting situation,

and at several intersections of the physical and verbal duel, the gleaming brass swords became vividly emblematic of the sexual drives of the two contestants.

Apart from Absalina's outfit, which was a cacophonous hybrid, the costumes were a simple black and white combination with a few gold or leather trimmings to distinguish the characters in high positions. The background musical accompaniment, too, was extremely simple, consisting solely of a variety of rhythmic beats provided by percussion instruments.

In most of its aspects, Abu Bakr Khalid's production displayed an austere Greek simplicity and limpid lucidity. It was eloquent without being pedantic and elegant rather than stylish. With the usual poor budget of Cultural Palaces productions it worked wonders, making up for the shortage of cash with lots of imagination and plenty of taste and talent.

Now that the Party is Over

3rd International Experimental Theatre Festival,

Backstage

Enter the Censor

With only two more days to go, censorship has suddenly cast its shadow upon the third International Experimental Theatre Festival. After a strongly-worded complaint from some officially-unspecified quarters, a decision was taken by the Ministry of Culture to ban a scene from the festival's opening performance, *The Game*, in subsequent productions. The offending item shows a fake Ka'ba, later revealed as an enormous oil barrel, being mounted by a belly-dancer amid the frenzied rotations of swirling dervishes and fake pilgrims. The scene was not intended to make fun of Islam's holiest of symbols; its innocuous message simply was that, rather than God, people are now worshipping Mammon. The visual impact of the scene, however, has proved too shocking for many, stirring up a veritable hornet's nest. Charges of profanity were hurled at the director in the daily press, packaged with a lot of virulent abuse and comparisons with the writer of *Satanic Verses*. The storm has not yet abated.

For me, at least, this incident has soured the festival, especially as it is not singular in its short history. Two years ago, a similar furore erupted round the Norwegian production of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. The issue that time was nudity and a scheduled repeat performance was banned. Then as now, the issue of the artist's freedom became the focus of a heated debate. The course the debate has taken so far does not augur well for the artist; at best, it may eventually die down, leaving the issue unresolved; at worst, it may yield further restrictions and a lot of fear, making experimentation in the theatre virtually impossible.

Exit the Tunisians

The much-looked forward to Tunisian *Commedia*, which threatened to last for four hours, has withdrawn from the festival for lack of a safety curtain. The National Theatre, where they were located, did not have one. They asked for the big hall at the Opera, but this proved unfeasible. Commendable as it is, this obsession with safety precautions intrigued me for a while until I discovered that the insistence on a safety curtain was not prompted by fear of fire but rather by the stage-designer's set.

Muddles and inconveniences

The Tunisians were not singular in their dissatisfaction with their assigned location. The Syrians and the Palestinians too were given totally unsuitable theatres. The Palestinians delayed their show until they could acquire the National Theatre Upstairs, but the Syrians got stuck at the out-of-the-way, poorly-equipped Sayyed Darweesh. Director Nayla El-Atrash had to restructure the stage there and borrow lighting equipment from other theatres. This entailed cancelling the first of her two scheduled performances at the last minute.

Delays and cancellations, however, were relatively few this year. The major source of complaint was the extremely tight schedule. The shows were not adequately spaced out to allow the audience sufficient time to move from one theatre to another, and many important ones overlapped or were scheduled at the same time. Another source of dismay was the failure of the festival's administration to advertise before-

hand some of the important morning lectures and seminars which took place at the Small Hall of the Opera House. Some were cancelled due to poor attendance.

On Stage

Initially, the festival gave a general impression of artistic mediocrity; gradually, however, this impression wore off, at least in my case, thanks to the contributions of the Poles, the Greeks, the Fins, the sedate French and the ebullient Rumanians. Indeed, the Rumanians seemed to steal the show. Everybody loved their bubbling high spirits, their colourful gaiety and masterful clowning and buffoonery. After their first zany production, *Medievals*, their reputation spread like wildfire and everybody flocked to their two subsequent productions, *The Coat* and *The Clowns*. The troupe, which is called Teatrul Masca, specializes in the arts of pantomime and clowning, which they handle with imaginative zest and technical proficiency. Their productions have a natural grace, an air of innocence and naivete, born out of real refinement and sophistication, a tolerant, easy-going spirit which hides a deep philosophical sadness. Behind the gaiety, the colours, the flying balloons, the funny routines and grotesque masks there lies a deep preoccupation with the human condition, a desperate striving to recapture the 'splendour in the grass and the glory in the flower'. In each of us grown-ups there is a dormant child. To awaken this child seems to be the target and guiding principle of Teatrul Masca actors, and what a knack for it they have!

From Eastern Europe too, the Poles came with a production vastly different in mood and tone, but equally exciting and even more provocative. After the show, everybody was spell-bound, and, without exception, everyone asked: is it theatre? Can you build theatre out of death, darkness and silence? And can you structure a performance round the absence of the actor of humanity?

This is the challenging task the Scena Plastyczna theatre of the Catholic University of Lublin in Poland sets for itself and its audience. The human condition, existentially conceived, is rendered in purely formal aesthetic terms. The theatrical space, which is the world, for this is a cosmic theatre, is a condensed black mass as shapeless as time before the creation of Man. This amorphous, claustrophobic black-

ness, however, is gradually modelled and takes aesthetic shape through the invasion of light, fade-outs, flashing images, sound and music. Humanity exists only in traces: in dummies, corpses, fragments, tombs and shrouds. Needless to say, the word is dead, for we never see, throughout the performance, a single whole, living specimen of humanity. Indeed, nowhere in the performance, if we can still call it that, does the reality of death hit the audience more strongly than at the end when we clap and cheer and are faced with an empty stage. No one comes to take their bows. The actor has been abolished and the author has long been dead.

The influence of the cinema and the plastic arts is quite palpable in this Polish production called *The Moisture*. In the French *Ajax, fils de Telamon*, by Bruno Meyssat, the influence of sculpture was predominant. Asked how I liked it, I automatically answered, "I do not know. It was hypnotic". And I was not hedging. I truly found it hypnotizing. The repetitive movement-patterns were massively solid in their slowness, flowingess, and concreteness; you couldn't miss a shade or detail of them. The director seemed to lead us, through the silence and the sparse sound-effects, and the frenzied, hysterical screams of babies, into the dungeons of collective memory, into the subconscious, the world of myth and dreams. And that mysterious, inaccessible world he objectified into a vision, a visible concrete world and a theatrical experience. But it was a theatrical experience which nearly tipped into the stillness and spiritual kinesis of sculpture. Haunting is how I would describe the final impression of *Ajax* and sculptured and distilled is how I would describe its style and method.

Between the still modalities of sculpturing space into experience in time, and the kinetic modalities of harnessing the flow of time and the evanescence of place into tangible experience, we could place the rest of the festival's visiting foreign items. The Greek *Philoctetes*, adapted from Sophocles by Vassilis Zioghas and directed by the extremely youthful Nicolas Diamandis, managed superbly to transcend the barriers of place and time, achieving a cultural wedding between Egypt and Greece, between past and present, the pagan and the Christian, myth and reality.

Arriving somewhat late, and frantically rushing in having hastily dumped, rather than parked, the car, we suddenly caught a glimpse of a vision. Against the awesome and majestically beautiful background

of the pyramids and the Sphinx, a row of monks in flowing robes, stuck up on high poles against the enchanting panorama, chanted melodious incantations. A little boy selling postcards, who could not conceivably have had any idea about Philoctetes or Ulysses or Greek tragedy or Sophocles had looked on over the fence, mesmerized. When my companion asked him if he liked the play he said, 'I adore it. I don't want it ever to go.' When I transmitted his simple, but rather impossible, wish to the charming Mr. Diamandis, he was deeply moved and promised to come back with a whole festival of Greek tragedy to be performed at the feet of the Sphinx. It's something to look forward to.

Cairo : 19th Sept 1991.

The Best and the Worst

Festival follow-up,

For many people, the festival's awards came as a surprise; some found them dismally disappointing. The 11-member international committee of judges (which had to split itself into three groups to cope with the number of contesting shows) seems at the last minute to have opted for a middle-of-the-road course and a policy of compromise. The award for best production was jointly shared by the Hungarian *Miles Gloriosus* and the Finnish *The Lady of the Camellias*, as if to strike a balance between the old and the new, and play up at once to both the traditionalists and the avant-gardists. As the other awards were announced, however, the balance tipped heavily in favour of tradition and the Plautian farce walked away with two more awards for best director and best actor. France was nominated for best scenography while best actress went to Dala' El-Rahbi for her performance in the Palestinian National Theatre's *Rape*. The Romanians who were obviously the most innovative and the most popular with the audience were cruelly left out, getting only a cursory acknowledgement of their distinguished contribution to the festival in a kind of footnote at the tail-end of the committee's report. No wonder they looked on in disbelief, shook and disappointment clearly written

all over their faces. The had no quarrel with The *Lady of the Camellias*; it was truly original. But *Miles Gloriosus*! Why, it's only a conventional farce; brilliantly executed, yes but nothing new or experimental about it. And one could not help agreeing with them. Indeed, if the criterion of technical competence, rather then innovation, was the one adopted by the committee, then the Greeks, as many people remarked, should have won, not to mention the Poles. Like the Hungarian *Miles Gloriosus*, the Greek *Philoctetes* may have belonged to the mainstream of traditional drama, but at least it had an original scenography and experimented with the modern use of the old Greek chorus, fusing elements from the heritage of the Christian Greek Orthodox Church, particularly the rituals and practices of the Stylite monks, and the legacy of Greek drama and its pagan mythology. This is surely a more challenging and adventurous task than simply reviving the techniques of the Italian commedia dell' arte and polishing them up.

Disconsolate as the Romanians were, they could still regard themselves as lucky for having got a mention in the adjudicating committee's report. The poor Poles, on the other hand, were outrageously ignored and silently bypassed. The unfairness of it caused general dismay. Their *Moisture* may have stayed within the conventions of black theatre, as some remarked, and its status as theatre may be thoroughly controversial, but how could anyone ignore or deny its poetic impact and imaginative energy?! The Indians, too, were inconsolable; they had given a good performance and they knew it from the immediate response of the audience and the later feedback. All they got from the committee was a brief and casual commendation of their leading actress.

The Egyptian critics' awards, fortunately, went a long way towards redressing the balance of justice – if only the audience could hear them. Sadly, they were hurriedly announced in Arabic, without bothering to give an English or French translation, and the winners, who did not know what was going on, were startled to find themselves suddenly nudged by their Arabic-speaking neighbours and urged to mount the stage. They rushed up, uncomprehending, nearly stumbling over each other, and almost getting the wrong certificates of merit in the general muddle. Still, the Romanians at last got recognition in the form of a best actor award for their leading actor and the director of

The Coat, Mihai Malaimare; Heisnam, the prima donna of the Indian Kalakshetra troupe from Manipur, shared the best actress award with the leading actress of the Palestinian show, and the Poles were awarded best scenography. The merit of the Finnish *The Lady of the Camelias* proved incontrovertible; the Critics' Award for best production went to it undividedly. And while the excellent Greeks remained prizeless, a special certificate of merit was given to the Egyptian production of *King Lear* and its director Mohamed Abdul Hadi.

After the awards ceremony, the Finnish Pandora's Stage actors were invited to give a further performance of their winning 35 minute *The Lady of the Camelias*, and what a disaster that was. The two actresses were not given sufficient notice and had not, therefore, had time to inspect the stage or supervise its preparation, with the result that they played in almost total darkness, and had their few essential props periodically knocked down or blown away by the wind for lack of wind-screens. In a different, more robust show, this would have been a nuisance, but it would not have mattered so much. Given the austere simplicity and artistic fragility of the Finnish construction, it mattered everything. The show is built out of the conflict between people and their grey drab surroundings which they proceed to dress up in meaning and colour, using only their clothes which they tear to pieces, in a progressive, austere striptease, and turn them inside out to reveal underneath the coarse and dull, dusty-coloured exterior a multicoloured lining of breath-taking beauty. Little by little, four coldly forbidding and cross-like iron stands are hung up with a pair of red shoes, a bunch of white camellias, a book, a white sock and a dagger, and then with the colourful torn bits of clothes until they acquire shape, meaning and beauty. The meaning is elusive and the suggestions are many. They are all projected to the broken tunes of a pathetically cracked barrel organ. A bird of paradise shape dominates over a configuration suggesting at once scarecrows, opulent ladies and gentlemen ceremonially dressed, and the types of signs and banners you come across in religious festivals. Having dressed up the world in meaning and beauty, the two now pathetically denuded actresses, bald, in grotesque make-up and neutral shroud-like white gowns, carry their artistic formations to the front of the stage and withdraw to the tinkling rings of an auctioneer's bell.

This is how the show materialised at the small floating theatre in Giza over two nights. At the open-air theatre of the Opera House, however, where the festival's closing ceremony took place, the performance was a poor and cruel travesty of itself. We, the critics, looked like fools giving our best performance award to this sloppy mishmash of images, and it was no use telling people that they should have seen it in its original version. The critics, together with the members of the official awards committee, were dubbed as wayward, pretentious imbeciles. We felt like breaking down and crying after the performance, just as the two Finnish actresses did. We ended up, Egyptian critics and Finnish artists, comforting each other.

And as if that were not enough, during the buffet dinner which followed, we were plagued by a long-bearded, obtrusive Lebanese who went round holding an empty plate, clinking his fork on it in the manner of a beggar and declaring to all and sundry that the awards were politically rigged! Most of us ignored him, but actress Salwa Mohamed Ali, who competently undertook all three sisters in *King Lear*, and came out of the festival empty-handed but took it in a sporting spirit with a gracious no-sour-grapes attitude, took him up on his challenge. In her theatrically strident and impressively stentorian tones, she told him roundly that he was a fool. What earthly good could Egypt hope to gain from poor Finland or impoverished Poland and Romania?

Apart from the Palestinian *Rape*, whose director Jawad El-Asadi (an Iraqi exile who lives in Syria) got a mention in the committee's report and the Egyptian *Lear* whose director got a certificate of merit from the critics, the rest of the Arab contestants went unnoticed. For some, it was a bit unfair; the Syrian production of Dario Fo's *The Accidental Death of An Anarchist* and the Moroccan handling of Lorca's *Yerma* were creditable, though the latter was marred by a feeble performance from the actress in the leading role. The Jordanian adaptation of Lorca's *Blood Wedding* was ambitious, but rather naive and formally pretentious. The director opted for a deliberately monotonous mode of verbal delivery embroidered with marionette movement patterns to communicate the idea that the people in the play were merely puppets in the hands of fate. It worked for a while, but then became insufferably boring and ridiculous rather than funny. The Saudis proved the most ingenious of all, doing a version of *Hamlet* despite

the fact that they're not allowed to have women on the stage. For Gertrude and Ophelia they used two statues to get around the rules! What a way to bring out the ineptitude of both women in the play! Roget Assaf's long anticipated *Hakawati* show was another big disappointment - a longwinded, unexciting political monodrama with a lot of dolls and masks. I did not get the chance to see the rest of the Arab contributions but was told that I did not miss much. As for the Egyptian shows (and there were 20 of them) *Dayer Dayer, The Carnival of Ghosts* (recently returned from Avignon), the National Theatre's *Crazy Dance* and *Price of Exile*, and the Cultural Palaces' *Doodles* and *Street Scene* ranked as the best; the rest were hastily scrambled affairs, knocked up at a moment's notice.

I was sorry to miss the Moscow Art Theatre's *Emigrants*, reportedly an impressive acting duel, the American New World Repertory company's *Electra,* which never even arrived, the Italian *Tragedia*, which mysteriously withdrew at the last minute, Belgium's *Arousseya, The Daughter of Georgette and Abdalla,* which promised to be an exciting exploration of the conflict between East and West (but I had had enough of monodramas, a form for which I have a great deal of antipathy), Peru's *Salty Taste,* and Mexico's *The Lady and the Unicorn* (another monodrama with a lot of 'Tanura' dancing). I was lucky, however, to catch the Austrian *Collision*, an ingenious modern dance and mime piece about a modern Adam and Eve, the Japanese *Endless* (which was endlessly repetitive in its rotating sequences, with a bolero kind of structure underlined by hypnotic music and a swirling light-reflecting stand) and the Dutch *Victims of Sound,* an amusing and well-executed piece about Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. Another production which deserves to be mentioned was the Czech Kosheki Theatre's *A Man's Life,* a moving and sad theatrical metaphor dominated by a sepulchrally white door which evolves as a versatile symbol of the home, the womb and the tomb, or birth, marriage and death.

At the end of the festival I wished there could have been an award for the worst entry. This would have gone undoubtedly to the Philippines and their *Fantasticks* would have honourably deserved it. For two and a half hours we were treated to a pale imitation of an American off-Broadway musical hit with nothing Filipino about it except the Asian features of the actors. It was painful to watch this total absorption and death into another, alien culture. The show was an incomparable instance of total cultural subservience.

El-Tali'a (Avant-garde theatre) :
26th Sept. 1991

Work in Progress

Controversial as the value of the Experimental Theatre Festival and the quality of its fare may have been, it has at least yielded some benefits in the form of two theatre workshops which sprang up in its wake. The first was started by the American playwright and director Laura Farabo, who has lately specialised in mixed-media shows and 'site-specific' productions, i.e. productions which are structured round the life and character of a particular real location and based upon an exploration of its activities and the people who populate or frequent it. One may call them off-shoots of the Environmental Theatre or variations on the Happening.

During the festival, Farabo, who acted as a member of its international adjucating committee, gave an interesting lecture-demonstration which dealt with the contemporary American theatre in general and the her own work in particular. It was so poorly advertised and attended that it ended up as an intimate round-table discussion. The talk, however, proved sufficiently exciting that when Farabo announced her intention of conducting a 10-day workshop after the festival, many young theatre artists were keenly interested in taking part. I myself was anxious to attend it as a spectator and asked Laura about

the times and dates. She referred me to Hassan El-Gretly, the manager of the new Hanager experimental theatre at the Opera House, who, she told me, would arrange everthing and duly inform us. I talked to El-Gretly, who promised to contact me and all the other interested critics and artists. He never did. To our bitter disappointment, we only learned that the workshop had materialised when it was over.

Fortunately, the Dutch-sponsored La Maqual Company's workshop at the Tali'a (avant-garde) theatre in Ataba had nothing of the hushed secrecy of the Farabo workshop about it. Something like 40 artists from different amateur and young private troupes, besides some theatre students, took part in it. Terence Roe, an Englishman, and Sabri Saad El-Hamus, an Egyptian, who both delighted us with their moving and hilarious rendering of the plight of the silent movie actors in their *Victims of Sound* during the festival (directed by Armand Perrenet), were keen to work with the Egyptian artists and Samir El-Asfouri, the manger of El-Tali'a was quite willing to host them. we were At the end of seven days, we were all invited, critics, actors and theatre-lovers, to watch their work in progress.

What we watched, or, rather, participated in, was a performance-in-the-making-cum-actors' training-session. Despite its unfinished, improvised look, the performance, or, rather, the evening, yielded a refreshing and exhilarating theatrical experience.

There was quite a crowd in the small garden of the Tali'a theatre when I arrived. People stood around in groups and clusters. Suddenly, amid the chatter and laughter, the actors emerged silently from the building, shrouded in red cloaks, and proceeded in a file to climb up the few steps leading to the adjacent tiled spacious courtyard of the Puppet Theatre. Naturally, we followed, and spaced ourselves round the courtyard, while the actors stretched symmetrically on the low stone partitions marking the different areas and levels of the space. They were still for a while, but gradually came to life in bouts of spasmodic writhing. When they finally sprang up, casting off their bright red shrouds, they revealed themselves as blind robots. For a while, they rushed about mechanically, in straight lines, in a kind of crazy traffic, banging into the walls, the lamp-posts and each other, and making sharp, angular turns and twists, before they went back to their places, folded themselves in their shrouds once more and resumed their former rigid, prostrate positions. The few electric bulbs, which

lay on the floor in a disorderly jumble, at the end of a mass of trailing black wires, suddenly went out, announcing the end of this sequence. Immediately our attention was caught by screams and shouts coming from the Tali'a garden, where the lights had gone up, and we duly headed that way *en masse* retracing our steps. On the stone fence surrounding the biggest tree in the garden, another group of actors sat sleepily, slumped against each other. Suddenly, they sat up, twitching and scratching frantically, and frenzidly dusting the fence; then, shouting and screaming, they leapt up into the air, hitting furiously at imaginary fleas or furies and finally hurled themselves at the tree, embracing its trunk. This strange and funny sequence was repeated at least five times before someone beckoned to us to move into the small hall of the theatre. We left the scratching actors still at it, going through the sequence for the sixth or, perhaps, eighth time. It seemed nightmarishly endless and, funny as it was, it carried a hint of surrealistic terror and the menace of automatisation.

Inside the hall, another sequence was already in progress and we were caught in a whirl of circles as a young female dancer kept swirling round the still, sullen figure of a little girl. Periodically, the dancer would stop to kiss, caress, or slap the little girl in an attempt to coax or provoke her into some kind of reaction. Meanwhile, the heads of a man and a woman could be seen at the small window of the lighting compartment high up. Snatches of the woman's cajoling speech were sometimes overheard above the loud, monotonous piping of a flute, played by a squatting young girl, while the couple's silent gestural love-dialogue was interspersed with occasional slaps on the face of the man whenever his eyes strayed out of the window. When the woman finally slams the window shut, and the flute gives way to the drum, the actors flood into the hall and range themselves opposite each other and a kaleiodoscopic eruption of sound and movement ensues.

The rest of this sequence is noisier, livelier and more violent than anything that has come before. The themes laid out or faintly suggested in the two earlier sequences, all very general and rather archetypal, are taken up and woven into a complex web of images and intricate patterns of meaning. The source of inspiration here is ancient Egyptian myth and the temple-drawings. When the woman at the window appears in the midst of the actors, ranged in rows at both ends of the hall, and declares that she is Isis, both modern and old, she pro-

vides a loose frame of reference which helps us to give the jumble of fragmented surrealistic and, sometimes, hallucinatory images some degree of lucidity, form and coherence. Strip-cartoon images of modern life intersect, clash and intermingle with vague, faded images from the past (like faint memories or collective dreams), recalling the mythical battles of Seth and Osiris, between life and death, good and evil. The conflict, the images suggest, has not yet been resolved and continues under many guises into the present age, with its robots, devilish fleas, violence, loneliness and social injustices. There is even an ironical twist: Isis the goddess, the archetypal mother and source of life and the mother of the mythical saviour Horus is paradoxically identified and implicitly compared, at one moment, with the desperate women who figure in the press reports covering the recent wave of husband-killing. What a degradation and a deterioration, the image wryly says!

The fourth and last sequence is in the nature of a cheerful musical finale. It leads us out of the small,stuffy, crowded and dimly-lighted hall into the garden, a glare of torches surrounding the leafy tree and the melodious strains of an old, popuar folk song strummed on a lute. We bask in the warmth of a communal spirit, and join in the singing, grateful to have escaped at last the vaults and dungeons of dream and memory and the subterranean regions of myth and the Jungian collective unconscious.

Apart from the spirit of participation and the sense of intimacy engendered by watching a work of art in the process of formation, and apart from the invaluable training and experience our actors have gained from Roe and Hamus in the arts of theatrical collage and surrealistic theatre (in both of which Roe is an expert) and in the collective structuring of a subtle, coherent show - apart from all this, I think that the prime value and source of interest in this show was its magical transformation of the whole of El-Tali'a theatre, hall, garden, trees, stones, steps, neighbouring courts and all, into one big theatrical space which had meaning and beauty. For me that was a revelation and I shall always be grateful to Terence Roe and Sabri Saad El-Hamus for it.

The American University Wallace Theatre:
Cairo: Sept. 1991.

A Storm in a Tea-Cup

Over the past two years, Egyptian-British playwright Karim El-Rawi has managed, wittingly or otherwise, to build up a kind of fame (or notoriety) in Egyptian theatrical circles and to establish himself as a deeply controversial figure. Some champion him as a dauntless freedom-fighter and a valiant crusader against censorship; others adopt an extreme opposite position (possibly in reaction) and cast him in the derogative role of clever manipulator and self-appointed martyr .

To my mind, both attitudes are extremist, if not ridiculous. Whatever campaigns El-Rawi has waged have been personal, i.e. closely allied and vitally linked to his own work and not to the work of others or to the general issue of censorship in Egypt. If it had been otherwise, El-Rawi would not have remained so remarkably silent over the moral massacre of Mansour Mohamed, fellow artist and victim of censorship. El-Rawi is neither a crusader nor a victim; he is simply a playwright and should be known and evaluated as such .

The trouble is that very few people (including myself until quite recently) have had the chance to be acquainted with that essential aspect of El-Rawi – the spinner of tales, story-teller side which constitutes the meaning of his name in Arabic. His plays have not been

available in print, nor were they made accessible in any other form, e.g. recordings, play-readings, exposition and discussion seminars, etc . . . In production, on the other hand, they were enclosed within the formidable precincts of the American University, with its exclusive, elitist and, somewhat, westernized clientele .

El-Rawi's attitude, too, contributed not a little to the series of misunderstandings which have bedevilled his relationship with his own country of birth and which, through accretion, have solidified into a barrier between his work and its prospective audience, presuming that it was meant to be Egyptian. Aloofness, suspicion and condescension, even a faint hint of it, have never been, as the Scot Edward Lane discoverd back in the 19th century, the nearest route to the heart of Egyptians. Such an attitude is vastly different from the humourously tolerated natural reserve of the British, their tendency to play down emotion and their curious, but elegant, predilection for understatement, let alone their teasing fondness for qualifications and modifications.

Having established yourself as a promising playwright on the rise in England, why bother to come back to Egypt? It is a question that has irked many. Was Mr. El-Rawi really such a bleary-eyed innocent, or so completely cut off from the world, that he did not know beforehand that Egypt had a rigid censor?! Having lived so long with the fact of censorship which is invariably either politically motivated or religiously oriented, and borne its brunt, working out our own strategies of eluding or overcoming it, we didn't need (thank you very much) someone coming from a censorless-abroad-destination to tell us that we had to fight against censorship!

Unfortunately too, El-Rwai has displayed a naive tendency to lump all Egyptians under the rubric of backward nation and to veiw us all as bigoted imbeciles standing rank and file behind the censor in the name of nation, Islam, or what you will! No wonder that he told a reviewer that he did not think it worth his while to make himself part of the Egyptian theatrical scene and that he viewed himself in the role of a cultural missionary who is duty-bound to provide us, poor backward savages, with, and I qoute his own words, 'alternative ways of looking at the world or viewing reality'!

In my experience as a theatre critic, which is relatively long, I have discovered that the worst disservice you can do a new playwright is to make him arrive on the scene hidden behind a verbal smoke screen or exotically whirled round in a critical sand-storm . The author's publicized opinions pre-condition the audience's expectations, and, to be honest, I cannot deny that I have, forcibly, been subjected to a degree of preconditioning; I have consciously resisted it, and, hopefully, eluded it. But who knows?!

When I received an invitation to watch three plays by El-Rawi in private peformances at the A.U.C., I was grateful to finally get the chance to make up my own mind about him, rather than having it made up for me by others, including the writer himself. It would have been nice, I thought, if they could have squeezed in the censor-banned *Crossing the Water* which was described by one Egyptian critic who lives in London as a 'Zionist propaganda piece' simply because it has a Jew in the *dramatis personae!* A British friend, who watched it in London, tells me that it is a nostalgic rendering of the fading away of an empire and reminded him of Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. The fanatical fury of the Egyptian critic seems to have been fired by the subsidiary and marginal status of the Egyptian characters in the text, some of whom are homosexuals .

Having reconciled myself to hearing about, rather than seeing, *Crossing the Water*, my disappointment was further augmented by the sudden cancellation of the scheduled performance of *Absent Cities*. No-one would tell us exactly why. Mr. El-Rawi and a member of the *Deserted House* cast dropped some mysterious hints about their being led to understand that it would be better to suppress the performance; but they would not specify by whom. A journalist friend, working for Reuters, tells me that it was the A.U.C. authorities and not the Egyptian censor who issued the veiled, softly-couched ban. The reason? Something to do with Baghdad and Jerusalem, my source vaguely replied; 'there is an attack on the U.S. I guess,' he added.

We were left with two plays. The first, *City of Peace*, struck me as an intensely lyrical monodrama, despite its four or five characters. The one individualized voice in the play is the mystic poet El-Hussein Bin El-Mansour's (alias El-Hallaj), a real historical figure, whose revolt and martyrdom in Baghdad in the year 309 H. (c.930 A.D.) inspired the late Egyptian poet Salah Abdul Saboor to write his dramatic

masterpiece *Murder in Baghdad*. El-Rawi's handling of the figure is equally poetic and moving, and the verbal texture of the play is densely allusive and intricately embroidered with extracts from varied texts evoking several echoes. To trace the sources of the play, or make any kind of fair comment on its structure, one would have to examine the text in print. I was promised a copy, and am still waiting.

In terms of visual impact, the performance, despite its monologic and static character, was impressive and metaphorically potent. Sitting on a prayer-carpet, stripped to the waist, with a bluish light glistening on his pale skin, Mahmoud El-Louzi formed a striking contrast with the formally and fully dressed figures (in modern suits) of his interrogators lurking in the dark shadows, imbued in a haze of red. The most visually striking detail, however, was a number of jars, arranged in a semi-circle round the kneeling figure and containing candles. At the beginning of the interrogation, El-Hallaj lights the candles one by one punctuating his replies with that symbolic and telling action; at the end, when he knows he is doomed, he puts out the candles in the jars by screwing on the lids, giving each jar the name of a rebellious Arab poet.

The lyricism and symbolic potency of *City of Peace* was carried over into the second play, *Deserted House*, but projected through a different medium. El-Rawi's critical questioning of the past and his agonized examination of his own relationship with it were given a modern quasi-realistic setting and voiced in colloquial (Egyptian) Arabic. Unfortunately, the setting cracked under the symbolic weight, while the verbal medium burst at the seams, spilling over into a kind of strange mixture of classical and colloquial Arabic, alien to both the setting and the nature of the characters. The dialogue, though densely metaphoric and intelligent, and sometimes witty and subtly ironical, remained detached from either setting or character, hovering in a vacuum, and failed to achieve any kind of credibility. The characters on stage, despite their Egyptian names, sounded terribly British. I do not mean the acting, but the way they thought, felt, reacted and responded to each other as relayed in the dialogue. I caught myself during the performance unconsciously translating the dialogue back into English, its true verbal and cultural medium. In English and with better acting, especially in the female parts, the play could be quite enjoyable and even thought-provoking, despite its static structure, convoluted plot,

melodramatic revelations and Ibsenite skeletons in the closet. Alternatively, classical Arabic would not have been a bad choice; it is a literary language which never rubs shoulders with daily life on the streets and is rarely used for self-expression or communication except in writing. But why bother to write in Arabic, one wonders, when the audience you are addressing can understand English perfectly well and, furthermore, is quite familiar with this kind of play and its long western lineage which stretches back to Chekhov and Ibsen ?

Sexual Politics

After a series of delays, director Samir El-Asfouri has finally opened his long-awaited *House of Spinsters* at the National. With El-Asfouri in the director's seat one usually expects much. Sadly, however, the production turned out to be a sprawling, ramshackle affair, sloppily-planned and shabbily executed; it rambled and meandered for two long hours, constantly doubling back on its tracks, before it finally gave up trying to get anywhere and decided to slowly disintegrate – a process which lasted for two more hours. Dazed and befuddled, we crawled out from underneath the rubble and tottered out of the theatre, incredulously wondering at the enormity of the disaster.

In retrospect, having had sufficient time to recover, one could discern, however dimly, the production's original plan and make a reasonable guess as to where and why it went wrong. El-Asfouri started off with the rather ambitious idea of transposing *Bernarda Alba* and her sex-starved daughters from Lorca' s Spain into a lunatic asylum in modern day Egypt, and then letting them act out a loosely and freely adapted version of Lorca's play in much the same manner as Peter Weiss made the inmates of the Charenton asylum perform the 'persecution and assassination of Marat' in his famous *Marat/Sade*.

The asylum then, he hoped, could be built up metaphorically, through verbal and visual means, into a symbol of Egypt, with the inmates as the people and the staff and doctors as their political rulers and victimisers. In this way (one is still guessing), sex and politics would be harnessed in one central metaphor, equalising sexual politics with the politics of sex (to use the jargon of feminist criticism) or, more mundanely, equating sexual repression, perversion and frustration with political oppression, corruption, manipulation and deception.

Such a plan has the advantage of combining at once the serious and the spicy and, obviously, has great theatrical potential. With a good script, intelligent, unselfish acting from the all-female cast and, above all, a careful balancing of the diverse elements and a coherent overall artistic pattern, it would have yielded quite an impressive production.

Ahmed Afifi, who contributed the script and has another uninspired adaptation currently running at El-Salam theatre, seems to have a vocabulary of about a hundred words. A computer wordcount would be helpful. Judging by one's immediate impression, however, a verdict of severe linguistic debility complicated by general associative banality and frequent severe fits of repetitiveness is indicated. In a short script, such weaknesses would not be so glaring; in a four-hour-long show, they are deadly.

Apart from the verbal penury, the script gave the impression of being written in short spurts at long intervals, or of being composed by the actresses themselves on the spur of the moment. This is very different from free ad-libbing which is usually clearly marked as improvised and is never passed on as part of the main script. Indeed, one theatre reviewer was willing to bet that there was never any script, and that the monologues and dialogic exchanges were provided piecemeal and on the spot to suit the purposes of the actors (in this case actresses) and the sudden, upredictable, and often wayward flashes of the director's imagination. Such a view would certainly go a long way towards explaining the many absurd self-contradictions of the text.

A more plausible and kinder explanation, however, would be the extreme difficulty of casting a play in Egypt nowadays, particularly a 'grand' production which requires star quality. It is common knowledge that a number of stars have walked into the play only to walk out

a short while later for a number of known and unknown reasons. Repeatedly let down and with time running short, El-Asfouri found himself in the unfortunate position of having to do with what was available and to tailor the parts accordingly. Alterations in the text had to be made, naturally; but it is not unreasonable to expect that a certain amount of care should have been spent over ironing out the contrdications and discordances which have resulted from the alterations.

Other factors contributed to the confusion of the script and the production as a whole. The artificially foisted and clumsily inserted songs and dances constituted one. But a more serious and damaging factor was the acting which seemed quite at a loss, failing to make up its mind as to its stylistic identity and constantly traversing the space betwen vaudeville and melodrama with occasional detours into naturalism, classical declamation, stylisation, a *Commedia dell'arte* form of actor-audience traffic, Brechtian open impersonation, musical comedy routines and so forth.

The production might still have been saved had it not been for the voracious egotistical drive and the ruthless monopolising urge of comedienne Sanaa Yunis. Impersonating a frustrated nymphomaniac, she let herself go, making a sumptuous meal of the part, capitalising on its naughtiness and cashing in on its saucy comic potential. In complete disregard of text, director and fellow actresses she frivolously threw the principles of balance and coherence to the four winds and let it rip. She transformed the whole of the second act and most of the first into a vehicle for her own comic virtuosity (improvising, one suspects, all down the line) and managed, somehow, to disrupt the coherence and sobriety of the third act which, presumably, was meant to crystallise the moral of the play.

Still, when all is said and done, El-Asfouri remains one of those rare, fey, whimsical and quizzical artists who constantly amaze or shock you, and when they fail to make you gasp in wonder, will make you gasp in horror or despair.

The French Cultural Centre,
Cairo: 17th Oct. 1991

Foreign Centres and Fringe Troupes

Dealing with foreign cultural centres has always been, in Egypt and, I suspect, in most Arab countries, a hazardous business. At best, it could bring you under fire of xenophobics and jingoists, calling into question your loyalties, allegiances, and culrural identity; at worst, it could make you into the subject of close official or non-official scrutiny, as the case may be.

In the past, when most of the Arab world was under foreign occupation, 'collusion with the enemy' was the usual charge brought to the door of heedless culture-seekers. In the forties, a university teacher (later to become a prominent dramatist and writer) was rumoured to be a spy on account of his frequent visits to the British Conucil (the poor man was only trying for a scholarship) ; and since rumours die hard, the stigma clung to him like a bad smell long after he was proved innocent beyond a shadow of doubt. The same thing happened when the British Conucil sponsored a private theatrical troupe calling itself *Firqat el-Tali'a* (The Avant-garde) in 1942: despite a successful career which lasted for two years and many brillant performances in Cairo and the provinces, the members of the troupe had a hard time dispelling the doubts of some that they were 'stooges' of the enemy,

paid to propagate his culture and subversive ideas. The French were better off since their colonialist aspect was not immediately visible in the streets of Cairo in the figure of uniformed soldiers and pale-faced officials. George Abyad, the famous classical actor and director, could draw on their financial resources with impunity. On five different occasions, between 1910 and 1944, they helped him establish and maintain his own French-speaking theatrical company which boasted many performances at the old Opera House.

The fifties and sixties present a different picture. Under the impact of the political changes in Egypt and in the wake of the 1956 war the British and French receded to the back-ground (the Americans had not yet arrived on the cultural scene), and the Russinas and socialist states of Eastern Europe pushed their way to the fore. Their growing influence reached its climax and emblematic peak in 1968 with the establishment of the 'Theatre of One Hundred Seats' at the Czech Cultural Centre where for two years, until 1970, a group of brilliant artists, like Ahmad Abdul Halim (now head of the National Theatre) and his wife, actress Aida Abdul Aziz, together with director Mohamed Abdul Aziz, critic Hoda Hibisha and the brothers Ahmad Fouad and Abdul Moneim Selim, among others, worked, performing many texts banned by the censor. The ideological banner there was, naturally, red, or, at least, bright pink. And since the system's declared ideology was socialist, while its real practices were dictatorial and autocratic, the group had to walk a very thin rope indeed.

When the state opted for a different ideological course in the seventies, the fortunes of the foreign cultural centres reflected the change, adding another chapter to their chequered history. In the wake of his quarrel with the Russians, President Sadat clamped down on the 'bloody' centres, suspending their activities and depriving artists of a valuable haven and a much needed theatrical venue. And though the western centres escaped the president's wrath, they were somewhat intimidated by his peremptory stand. The next few years witnessed a progressive dwindling of their role; theatre artists seldom sought their help, and Egyptian performances there became a rare occurence. They concentrated on language courses, scholarships and the odd art exhibition or lecture. After all, these were much safer and less controversial channels of cooperation, and were, therefore, cultivated at the expense of that anarchic, unpredictable activity called theatre. Not that theatre,

or culture in general, were very much in demand right then. That was the great age of philistinism, bred out of the econoimic open-door policy (the worst type of *laissaer-faire* imaginable). It was the age of rampant commercial values, engendering cheap entertainers and profit-seekers and spawning a plethora of slipshod musicals, tawdry farces and insipid, mentally-retarded melodramas.

Things began to look up in the eighties; the relative degree of liberal democracy adopted by the government allowed the foreign centres in turn to adopt a more positive attitude towards the theatre and gave them more leeway. Gradually, a thin trickle of good, homegrown, experimental shows began to materialize through their ministrations. The Goethe Institute took the lead in 1987 by adopting and funding the newly formed *Warsha* troupe which burst upon the Egyptian theatrical scene with something of an eclat. The success of El-Warsha's inaugural double-bill (Dario Fo's and Franka Rame's *Waking Up* and Peter Handke's *The Pupil Wishes to Be a Teacher*) encouraged other centres to venture into the field of supporting the Egyptian fringe. The British followed suit, funding the *Warsha's* production of a Pinter double-bill (*The Lover* and *The Dumb Waiter* in 1988) and following that up with a production of Peter Terson's *The Great Reservoy* by director Ahmad Zaki at El-Salam theatre. The Goethe Institute stepped in once more to sponsor a *Warsha* production of a dramatization of Franz Kafka's *The Penal Colony* in 1989, then the French marched in, putting their full weight behind the first and second versions of *El-Warsha's* adaptation of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu* quartet of plays, and sending the final version to the Avignon festival into the bargain. The french also extended their activities to Alexandria, hosting a few performances at their centre there, of which the most noteworthy was a production of Beckett's mime-mono drama *Act Without Words.* It was perhaps the French example which finally prompted the Americans, singularly lagging in this field, to undertake last year the funding of a production of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by the promising director and playwright Mahmoud Abu Duma.

Having set Hassan El-Gretly and his Warsha troupe firmly on their feet (El-Gretly has recently been appointed head of the new experimental unit at the National Cultural Centre, and, surely, one couldn't get a firmer foothold than that, and, what is more, one in the lion's den), the French have shifted their attention elsewhere. Their

new protege is a talented young director who has recently launched his own private experimental troupe under the name of *Encounter*.

Khalid Galal, though still a student at the Theatre Institute of the Academy of Arts, is a graduate of Cairo University and has already established a substantial reputation as a talented director at university theatre festivals and competitions. In fact, the Russian Cultural Centre thought two of his productions well worth hosting last year and gave them a run of two days each. These were Mohamed Salmawi's *Come Back* Tomorrow and Samir Sarhan's *A King Looking for a Job*.

The launching of *Encounter* coincided with the preparations for the first Free Theatre Festival last September, and its debut production of Pinter's *Mountain Language* was chosen to open the Festival at the Small Hall of the Opera House on 1st October. The ingenuity and technical skill of Galal were quite obvious, together with an illusive lyrical quality and a sensitive sense of rhythm. To perform once more in public, *Encounter*, which has neither legal status nor licence to practice, let alone a home or funds, needed the support and protection of an official umbrella. Galal approached the French Cultural Centre to host his new production of Maurice Dekobra's *Carnival of Ghosts (Carnaval des Revenants)*. He had earlier directed it for Cairo University, but the production was banned because the *dramatis personae* included a harlot. He was asked to choose between the production and the harlot, and he chose the harlot. Consequently, that earlier production never saw the light. The people at the French Centre, however, had no such scruples and proved quite amenable to the idea of hosting the play, complete with harlot. The fact that it was a French text was of crucial importance, and this underlines one of the most crippling drawbacks of relying on the help of foreign cultural centres: you simply have to work within each centre's cultural boundaries. Another serious drawback which Khalid Galal and his troupe will have to face, and which others before him have had to put up with, is the fierce antagonism of the theatrical profession which sometimes takes the form of vicious raillery and venomous ridicule or light-hearted disparagement and dismissal – an insidious war of attrition which seeks ultimately to discredit and marginalize their contribution on the grounds of its alleged elitism: "they tackle foreign texts and western issues alien to our society and culture, and address themselves to a small elite audience, a marginal minority, rather than to the common

man," is the usual complaint (invariably laced with bitterness or tinged with envy). But just as the Warsha artists have survived such hostile propaganda and weathered the attacks, eventually forcing even direst critics to acknowledge their talent and achievement, I dare say Galal too and his troupe will survive them.

Carnaval des Revenants premiered last month at the Munira branch of the French Cultural Centre where it ran for three days, then moved for a further three-day run to the Centre's branch in Heliopolis, coming back to Munira for one more performance. Shortly, it moves to Alexandria to play at the Centre's branch there where I expect the Alexandrians to derive as much pleasure from it as the Cairenes have done.

Indeed, despite some technical unevenness and rough edges, the production is generally rewarding and confirms one's faith in Galal's talent and ability. The play, which tells of a group of dead people who are brought to life by a scientist only to discover that death was better, is predominantly sober and moralistic in tone. Into this heavy-handed text, Galal injected huge doses of parodic comedy and farce without sacrificing the macabre element or the general air of wistfulness. He condensed the play, adumbrating some scenes and replacing others with imaginative mime sequences, which at times evoke certain familiar cinematic cliches with hilarious consequences. In places, it is true, the show betrays El-Gretly's influence, particularly in the use of puppet-like postures, lurid make-up and head-gear; however, the many flashes of originality more than make up for what is after all quite an understandable slip given the extreme youth of the director.

The future of Encounter is still very much in the balance, and whether it fades or goes on to achieve something of the prestigious reputation of El-Warsha is up to its members and, I suppose, to fate or the powers that be. But they will certainly need all the help they can get, and one hopes that the French and other cultural centres will continue to extend their moral and material support to them and the other struggling talents of the Egyptian Fringe.

O, What a Lovely War!

At last, the maestro of the Egyptian theatre, Karam Mutawi, is back in business. With his magical directorical baton, he is currently conducting Mustafa Mahmoud's *Song of Blood* at the National.

Though never a great fan of war drama, I found myself strangely enjoying this short intellectual piece. Most of the credit for this, one suspects, goes Mutawi's subtle, distilled and almost ascetic style of production. The text itself, however, despite its overtly moral tone, sentimental bent and occasional verbosity, is replete with theatrical potential.

Chance encounters between strangers in lonely places have always served dramatists well, in many cases giving an exciting aura of suspense to what would otherwise seem banal and mundane. The lonely spot Mahmoud chosses for his two characters is itself fraught with gruesome associations - an old, deserted war cemetry in the desert near El-Alamein. Other well-tried dramatic devices like disguise, mistaken identity, and the sudden reversal of roles are also deftly used, and Mutawi exploits them all, making them yield maximum theatrical dividends. The cutting of the original text helped in this respect, removing a lot of verbal clutter.

Mutawi's well-known and consistent championing of the authority of the literary text in the theatre did not prevent him in this case from replacing stretches of the dialogue with audio-visual effects and relying heavily on the evocative manipulation of props, movement and lighting. With a square table, a red cover, a rough-hewn wooden armchair, two small barrels, a copper tray, an enormous guitar case enclosing a machine-gun and a number of cut-out upright coffins (moved by invisible extras) he managed to create a dynamic, mobile set which often seemed to take on a life its own and participate actively in the drama.

Indeed, the production bristles at every moment with brilliant imaginative detalis and ingenious strokes; of these the most striking, apart from the seeming automobility of the props, were the entrance of Abdul-Rahman Abu Zahra, the cemetery keeper, in the opening scene, shrouded in a grey sleeping-bag and rolling into view like a lifeless corpse and then the silhouetting of Yehya El-Fakharani in a halo of bright light as he emerges from the dark later on. Besides the visual thrill one got from this simple placing of two strong spot-lights at the back of the stage, directly facing the audience, this trick served to underline the irony of the situation, the element of menace and the metaphorical level of the play. The irony was also enhanced by the stranger's elegant, spotless white suit, his dandified air and generally dainty, mincing behaviour. The same meticulous attention to detail was extended to the set, the costumes, the sensitive and breath-takingly beautiful lighting (desigened by Mutawi himself), and to the careful orchestration of the tonal and gestural modes of the actors' perfomances.

El-Fakharani did his best with a small, untrained voice, more suited to the screen, but brought to the part a lot of his usual zest and charm and managed to bring out the sense of menace underneath the thick coat of urbanity. Abu Zahra, too, handled his part with finesse and competence, striking a delicate balance between pathos and humour, and not shying away from the homosexual overtones of the character. They formed a successful duo and gave a blithe, gripping and thoroughly enjoyable performance .

I do not remember the last time I saw an Egyptian production so elegant, so clean and uncluttered. It proceeds at such a lively, fast pace, that before you know it, it has ended. Like Cleopatra, it seems to make hungry where it most satisfies. And at the end, one is reminded

that Mutawi's bag of theatrical tricks is inexhaustible. The curtain is something of a *coup de theatre*, and it would be unfair to give it away.

Added to the shortness of the show (one hour), a welcome relief in the current glut of four-and five-hour shows, is its early start at the convenient hour of seven, which lets you off at the decent hour of eight. In all respects, a highly recommendable evening .

To Carthage then I Came . . .

On the morning following our arrival in Tunis, a car drove us out of town. Our destination was Sidi Bu Said, a residential area of great beauty at the top of a grassy hill, overlooking the sea, famous for its magnificent land-and sea-scapes, its cobbled steep winding alleys, white and blue Tunisian architecture, and delightful, oriental-style cafés.

On the way, we made a small detour to see the ruins of Carthage, the city founded by the Tyrians in 814 BC. We wound our way through thick vegetation. A few pillars, remnants of statues, moss-covered podiums and bits of wall were scattered here and there. One was strongly reminded of the city's fall in 146 BC, its ransacking and burning. Unlike St Augustine, who declared in his *Confessions*, "To Carthage then I came, where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about my ears," all I could hear was the silence and rustling of leaves. The great fire which T.S. Eliot movingly commemorated in *The Waste Land,* in *the Fire Sermon*, had long been extinguished by frequent showers. All that remains of Queen Dido's new town (which is what the city's name means in both Phoenician, Kast Hadasht, and Latin, Carthage) is a desolate place, once dedicated to the infernal gods and

forbidden all human habitation. Is this the city that once vied with Alexandria as the cultural centre of the Old World?

The car drew up suddenly in front of a wide gravel path, jolting me out of my reverie. At the far end, a black iron gate glistened in the rain. A few souvenir vendors watched under the hedge that lined the path. Although we were the only visitors, they made but a feeble effort to attract our attention. I knew that they would wait for us patiently until we had finished our tour of the place, and then the real harrassment, heckling and hustling would start. With that ominous prospect in mind, I stepped through the gate only to find it suddenly evaporate, together with all other thoughts, under the overwhelming impact of the sight confronting me. The Carthage amphitheatre is so remarkably well-preserved that you feel you are stepping back into the past. The structure strongly evokes the richness of the old city's life and culture. You could almost see the actors, strutting and fretting, declaiming and cavorting on the slightly-raised stage, and the audience in their colourful clothes, lining up on the semi-circular stone tiers that seem to reach up to the sky. The silence teems with distant echoes, hums and the sound of laughter. From the top tier the view is truly stunning. Behind you, the hill, at the foot of which the amphitheatre nestles, rolls upwards, and facing you, dark green hills dotted with white villas slope down to the sea .

No wonder the Tunisians, when they first decided to have their own international theatre festivel back in 1983, chose to christen it after the old city in honour of its one surviving complete monument .

In the previous festivals (which number only four since the festival is held every other year alternately with the Damascus Theatre Festivel), some performances I am told, took place at the amphitheatre. This year, however, to my chagrin, not a single work out of the 80 participating in this fifth session, and making up a total of 170 performances from 30 countries, was given at this historical site. The timing of the festival, 28 October-6 November, may account for that. The previous festivals, however, took place close to this date, when the weather could not have been warmer or less rainy. It seems wrong-headed to me, somehow, to have such an inspiring theatrical space, name a festival after it, and then ignore it completely. Instead, we were left scurrying breathlessly from one closed traditional theatre to another, trying to cram into a single evening as many shows as pos-

sible. But even with four shows per evening over ten daysdays, (the duration of the festival), one could not hope to see more than half the fare on offer. Naturally, the prestigious troupes and well-known names attracted the bulk of the audience and were given the bigger theatres. Fame, however, was no guarantee of excellence, and however careful one was in selecting the shows, things felt more and more like a game of pot-luck. The frequent changes in the printed programme from day to day did not help either. And when you have spent your morning deciding carefully between the listed shows and working out your evening viewing programme you can imagine the frustration at finding half of them cancelled on arriving at the location.

My own frustration was exacerbated by the unforseen honour (thrust upon me by the festival's director, Mr Moncef Souissi, without prior consultation) of making me a member of the festival's International jury.

It meant having to see what, in many cases, I would not normally choose to see; and considering that the contest is limited to Arab and African countries, and excludes such interesting countries as India and Japan, besides the whole of Europe and Latin America, I could not help getting cold feet. It also meant for me a ban on all critical comments until the results were announcd at the closing ceremony, which explains my silence for the past two weeks. Another member of the jury, Ms Velia Papa from Italy, found herself in a similar predicement. She was not forewarned of her ordeal. Curiously, the other five members, all male, from Tunisia, Syria, Algeria, Palestine and France were informed beforehand. Do I smell some form of male prejudice here, or is it just my feminist nose?

In the best of circumstances, I am no great believer in theatrical compeitions. They presuppose the existence of absolute, uniform criteria of artistic value, whereas I maintain the historicity and relativity of artistic judgement. After all, isn't a production usually orientated towards a particular audience with its cultural background, codes and conventions? Ironically, that question formed the focus of the festival's three-day morning symposium which bore the title, "The Problematics of Reception and Communication in Theaatre." In my paper, which I had brought with me, I had stressed the complexity of the process and its relativity, both in the stages of encoding and decoding the theatrical message. And here I was, asked to pronounce judgement on

works which addressed different issues, audiences and cultural backgrounds. An added difficulty was the fact that whenever Arabs and Africans compete, politics and regional considerations invariably rear their heads.

At their first meeting the members of the jury, who on this occasion were remarkably free from external pressures, decided, as an article of faith, to uphold only two criteria: originality and technical competence. It meant that each of us had set him or herself the well-nigh impossible task of detaching, cutting him or herself off from their roots, political and existential preoccupations, and cultural backgrounds. Unassily, I still remember my sense of overwhelming relief as an Egyptian, when I knew that the four Egyptian plays which came to the festival *(The Song of Blood, Dayer,Would It Were So! and The Price of Exile)* had decided to stay out of the running. This saved me a lot of agonising soul-searching and afforded me the luxury of being objective, or at least, the illusion of it .

From the moment one arrived, one was plunged deeply into politics, and in the opening ceremony the pressure of public opinion in Tunis in favour of Iraq was unmistakably felt. The impression was deepened by the lukewarm reception of the Egyptian delegation and the conspicuous absence of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. One was left in no doubt that this was a post-Gulf war theatre festival.

The Indians were here with a mesmerising *Kathakali* piece from the Margi Kathakali Group; the Germans with their dancetheatre production of Satre's *Huis Clos by* Maria Lerchenberg (also seen at the recent Experimental Theatre Festival in Cairo), the Japanese with *Ailleurs* by the Theatre de L'E.V.N.I; the Romanian Teatrul Masca Troupe with their three pieces which we recently watched at the Cairo Festival *(Medievals, The Coat* and *The Clowns)* plus a new piece called *Oina* or *The Game*; the French came with Moliere's *Les Precieuses Ridicules,* directed Gilbert Rouviere, the Bulgarians with their *Magic Voices*; Peru with *The Taste of Salt* (also recently in Cairo, together with the Mexican *The Lady and the Unicorn*) etc, etc .

But despite these interesting foreign shows and others from Tunisians living abroad in Norway, Belgium, Italy, France and Germany and a Yugoslavian production, the political underpinnings of this theatrical congregation were intensely pronounced and pronouncedly regional.

In the betting fever which accompanies every theatrical competition, the favourites were naturally Tunisia, the host country, renowned for its experimental thrust in the French avant-garde tradition; Iraq, for its technical expertise in the traditional vein, its sudden innovative flashes of an Anglo-Saxon rather than Francophone type, and, to a lesser degree, Lebanon, which brought Roger Assaf *The Bell*, the Hakawati Theatre show, (also seen in Cairo); and Algeria with *The Wedding of the Wolf*. The artistic merit, pros and cons, of these productions, deserve another or other articles. Other fringe and parallel shows and many side shows will have to wait. In the present context, the end results will have to take the place of the prelude; the ramifications will come later.

Fifteen countries competed for the festival's seven awards: for Best Production, Direction, Male and Female Acting, Text, Scenography and Music. Of these, 12 Arab: Tunisia competed with two productions (*Commedia* by the French-trained director Fadil Jaabi and a Kabuki-style rendering of the Arab love story of Qais and Laila with strong political implications in the oriental manner of Ariane Mnouchkine's Théatre de Soleil productions in Paris). Libya brought its *Sindbad*, based on a text by the Egyptian Shawqi Khamis; Lebanon *The Bell*; Algeria *The wedding of the Wolf*, Sudan Wild *Hamid* adapted from a novel by the Sudanese novelist El-Tayeb; Yemen *The Elephant, O King of All Time* by the Syrian Saad Allah Wannus; Jordan *Rosanna and her Daughters in Search of Job*, a naive and simple-minded parable about the loss of Palestine: Morocco *El-Namrood in Hollywood* (in Arabic, the renegade); Syria, Brecht's *A Man for a Man;* Iraq, *A Contemporary Love Story*, a crafty multi-levelled text in the manner of Pinter and Strindberg with strong political connotations, and finally, Palestine who came with an up-to date political adaptation of Macbeth The Africans had only three competing shows: *Sein T'es Pris* from the Cameroun; *L'Homme au Visage de Mort* from the Ivory Coast; and *Chaka, Le Roi Visionnaire* from Senegal.

The merits of these shows, and their weaknesses, will be discussed in a future article. As for the results, which were announced a short while ago, these were as follows.

Best production: *Commedia*, Tunisia. Best Director: Fadil Jaabi for *Commedia*, Tunisia.

Best actress: Sohair Ayyad, *A Contemporary Love Story*, Iraq, Best Scenography: *Le Roi Visionnaire*, Senegal and Best Actor, Palestine.

Best Dramatic Text: Falah Shakir for *A Contemporary Love Story*, Iraq.

Best Music. *I shq Zad*, Tunisa.

Everyone was happy with the awards.

Curiously, they were also representative of the artistic merit of the contestants. But more of that later.

A Mad World, My Masters!

The festival got off to a convivial strart. The National Theatre on Bourgiba street was packed from top to bottom, and people were still arriving. Oustside, under a light drizzle, a group of folk musicians and dancers, in traditional dress, armed with pipes, drums, huge papier-mache masks and dolls, greeted the guests with a taste of Tunisan folklore. Film star Nur El-Sherif, who was walking beside me, suddenly disappeared. At the top of the marble steps leading to the gates, I glimpsed him whirling with the dancers.

In that festive atmosphere, I hardly thought that I would soon be plunged into a world of madness and frenzied despair.

It was the opening night, 28 October. The official ceremony had taken place earlier, leaving us an hour to catch our breath before facing *Commedia*, the Tunisian entry, which threatened to last for four whole hours without a single intermission. The prospect was truly forbiding. What could a director possibly do to keep his audience glued to their seats for that long duration?

After two hours, a few seats were empty; but the bulk of the audience remained until the end. Director Fadel Jaibi and his proficient troupe worked wonders, achieving that elusive thing called the poetry

of theatre. The plot, which I had been advised to read beforehand, because of my unfamiliarity with the Tunisian dialect and Jaibi's notorious tendency for rating sound over sense in his handling of language, had not sounded promising. It was a melodramatic, convoluted and somewhat confused story about a woman with a past who kills her husband for some mysterious reason, severs his head and, negligently, leaves it lying around! The dog picks it up and carries it to her brother-in-law, who turns out to be secretly in love with her and anxious to protect her. She is placed in a mental hospital where, by a fluke of fate, her psychiatrist turns out be a former admirer and slightly crazed to boot.

Hag-ridden and terrorised by a Gestapo-like foreign wife, he has been clandestinely carrying on with one of the nurses, impregnating her in the process. The impregnated nurse, who goes off the handle at the prospect of desertion and abortion, is, in her turn, secretly worshipped by a fellow male-nurse who frenziedly resents the doctor.

But that is not the end of betrayals and desertions, or of embryos out of wedlock. The psychoanalytical sessions with the murdering wife reveal a similar srory in her pre-marital past, with a difference. The baby girl she begot and summarily dispatched into the care of others has been secretly looked after by the adoring brother-in-law who brings her to the hospital, literally out of the dramatic blue, to look after her crazed mother.

Soon, however, she is infected with the rampant insanity of the place and murders one of the staff who attempts to rape her. The gallery of mad characters also contains a female, man-hater cook who derives immense pleasure from the idea of dismembering husbands, and a sexually-frustrated, wry and dry, gaunt matron whose husband went out one morning, six years ago, to buy bread for breakfast and never came back. Refusing to face reality, she still awaits his return. And when, finally, the illusion is shattered, she rushes madly at a male nurse and tries to rape him!

The first response to such a plot must be a hoarse wail of disbelief. In performance, however, it magically worked, yielding a riveting theatrical experience, a host of vivd, haunting images and a surrealistic sense of impending catastrophe. It was like watching the human mind stretched in agony to the extreme limits of endurance.

The stage was completely stripped bare of all its draperies. The stone grey wall at the back stared back at us along with a coin-operated telephone that transmitted nothing but pain, fear and despair, and a round clock that did not work. In the middle of that enormous space, which looked frighteningly vacant, a small automatic cofee-machine stood desolately, presumably representing the humdrum mechanised nature of modern life.

Corresponding to it, in a paradoxical, ironical kind of relationship, a big communal dining table protruded halfway downstage right with a clean, uncluttered, pristine white cover.

This was a place, one felt, where the holy supper would never be; no holy sacrament here, no communion; a place where lost souls measured out their lives with coffee spoons. A few white screens, hung on invisible lines across the stage, and a white hospital partition completed the set. With the movement of every screen, a deeper layer of the mind was uncovered.

Into this sparsely furnished set, the director infused a tremendous voltage of artistic energy. Lighting, under the spell of his directorial wand, became a principal formative element, casting significant shadows and telling hues, focusing and fading out the figures and areas of the dramatic space. It stressed the intense mood and atmosphere and drew with light illusive windows on the floor, climbing ropes and staircases on the back wall, mirage escape routes out of bedlam and inferno.

To emphasise the metaphor of human existence as hell, Fadel Jaibi used the fire curtain at the beginning and end. It was the absence of such a curtain at the Egyptian National Theatre which prevented *Commedia* from being presented in Cairo during the Experimental Theatre Festival .

Having seen the production, I could understand the director's balking at offering it without one. It functioned in his work as a metaphor for the gates of inferno and in a production like this, where every detail is carefully cacluated to transform a melodramatic, gangling plot into a vehicle for an almost apocalyptical revelation of the contemporary Arab mind and consciousness, one could not really blame him. Mr Jaibi truly deserved the award of the best director in the Carthage Festival. (His only competent rival was Hassan El-Gretly who

was, unfortunately, outside the contest). But the award for best production for *Commedia* could not have been won without the virtuosity and technical competence of its actors and actresses, their subtle political sensitivity and intellectual and human depth.

Ten days before leaving Cairo, I had seen (at the Egyptian National Theatre), El-Asfouri's *House of Spinsters*, which used the image of the loony-bin as a metaphor for the homeland and equated the sexual and the political under the rubric of frustration. Seeing the same theme replayed in Tunis, at its National, I thought that would be the end. But, O, no! More was to come. Madness, it seems, has become the order of the day and the most adequate vehicle for expressing modern Arab sensibility and world view.

The Palestinian entry was an adaptation of *Macbeth*, cunningly reflecting the identiy of the tyrant on both the US and Saddam; it was titled *The Gate of Hell* and subtitled, *The Madness of Macbeth*. Naturally, 'the porter of hell-gate' took the lead, acting as common man and universal commentator. The shadow of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* was very much present in the characters of the two guards who took dramatic precedence, with the porter, over the tyrant and his lady.

Director Jawad El-Asadi, who, in my personal estimation, ranks as one of the greatest directors the Arab world has known, was not at his best here. Despite an austerely simple black set with a blood-stained guillotine on the left and, a gate at the back and a voluptuous, predatory Lady Macbeth (Nadra Omran), the production seemed muddled, with no method to its madness .

The first performance clearly identified the ravenously power-mad Macbeth with Saddam. The Iraqi delegation was, predictably, angry. I saw them crowding round the Iraqi-born Jawad as I left the theatre. Later in the evening they were beaming. Jawad had apparently surrendered. The second performance at 8 pm the same evening had exchanged the beginning for the end and that had made things, somehow (God knows how), alright .

By that time, I had enough of hell and bedlam, and had started getting nightmares. But madness pursued me still. Azza Balbaa's one-woman *Wish It were So!* was not part of my schedule and I had also seen it in Cairo. But as an Egyptian, I attended the performance out of

courtesy and for the love of Azza's beautiful voice. And here, again, the ugly image of madness reared its head and the metaphor of the homeland as bedlam and existential hell clutched at the mind.

It must be the fault of the stars, I romantically thought, or, more realistically, the coincidence of the festival with the Middle East peace talks and the bitter, barbed political significance of the choice of Madrid as the setting at this particular moment in time. What a bitter reminder of the loss of Andalusia for the Arabs. No wonder people went mad on the stage and off it.

In Morocco, madness spilt onto the streets in a rabid, mind-boggling incident or, more aptly, crime. Moroccan actress Thorayya Gobran was dragged into a car by some fundamentalists, in broad daylight, and subjected to the traumatic, humiliating experience of having her hair cut off and her head shaved in places.

That brave woman, however, remained undaunted and came to Tunis, scintillating as always, in Abdul Karim Barsheed's *El-Namrood* (The renegade) *in Hollywood*. The text, unfortunately, was so limp and badly split right down the middle that no amount of acting or directorial skill could make it into an integrated, viable theatrical experience .

It was obviously hastily put together for the occasion and made a great point of using wigs and false hair to cash in on Gorbran's harrowing experience. For me, the most poignant moment in the one-hour show was when Gorbran, in the character of the concierge of a dilapidated half-deserted block of flats (symbolic of the Arab nation), suddenly removed her head scarf to reveal her closely cropped head.

Together with the wonderfully warm Italian Velia Papa, the only other female member of the jury, we insisted on giving Gobran something to go back and fight with. The other male members seemed maddeningly lukewarm and unconcerned, some regarding the incident as a mere sensational ploy! After a long and arduous debate, Gobran was sent home with a special certificate of merit for her pioneering and enlightening role in the Moroccan theatre. Velia and I leaned back, breathing a sigh of relief .

The Algerian entry, however, plunged us once more into madness and alienation. The scene was yet again a mental hospital, with a dic-

tatorial director, a coerced, frustrated doctor and a dangerous lunatic, formerly a freedom fighter in the war of independence. Film sequences projected at the back of a significantly lop-sided set provided the narrative background and effectively alternated with the live mental hospital and flashback scenes.

Three actors undertook the whole piece, slipping smoothly from one character into another. The play recounts a horrible story of betrayal. A soldier, reported dead in the war of independence, comes home and tries to establish his idently as a living man. Corruption, however, of the meanest sort, balks his efforts at every step. He ends up a beggar, a thief and a drug-trafficker. His desperate attempts to escape his exploiters and oppressors finally land him in the loony-bin. In a daring film sequence we see him sitting disconsolately on some stone steps, then the camera moves up to focus on a wall-sign sporting the words 'Independence Park'!

The name of the Algerian piece was *The Wedding of the Wolf.* It mystified me until Arabi Zakkel, the Algerian actor, director and member of the festival's adjudicating committee, explained its significance. The wolf, according to Algerian lore, never mates except when rain and sunshine combine; i.e., in the undefinable area of paradox and irony, where no state can be definitively proven. The play seizes upon the wolf's eccentric conjugal taste and uses it as a metaphor for political prevarication and social schizophrenia .

The Algerian entry may have been technically weak in places; but it was, on the whole, disturbingly daring and honest. And coming from Algeria, where the very existence of art and theatre is fundamentaly threatened, I fought to give it something, even a gesture of recognition. For lack of a more positive official award, it shared the Arab Artists Union's nomination for best production, together with the Palestinians.

Another Algerian show which deserves mention is *Fatma*, a monodrama which presents a fascinating Algerian actress by the name of Sonia. If Sonia's piece had gone into the contest, she would have more than deserved the award of best actress. Hers was a revolutionary, varied and sensitive feminist performance, summing up all our tragic history in the life story of one woman.

The woman who won the best actress award, however, was the Iraqi Sohair Ayyad. For me, Sohair's performance was an utterly unforgettable experience. That slender girl, with her huge saucer-like eyes, managed to concentrate, condense and crystallise the trauma and agony of war in her gait, posture and well-controlled voice fluctuations. Unlike the Jordanian simple-minded mythical parable about the loss of Palestine, with its naive false posturing and narrow-minded denial of Egypt's contribution in defence of Palestine, the Iraqi *Contemporary Love Story* was a complex, multilevelled work, of true tragic austerity and depth and remarkably free of slogans .

The stage here was again stripped bare and swathed in grey and black shadows. The setting represented a wrecked house after a blitz, where the furniture is all heaped in one room in topsy-turvy, humdrum fashion. Every now and then, mysterious auctioneers swoop down on the place, ferretting and rummaging through chests, desks and boxes, scattering about the precious memories of long years. In the midst of the wreckage, a man and a woman stand, trying to salvage something of the past.

There is no plot as such; the basic situation presents a deadlock where the only possible movement is backward into time, and deeper into the recesses of the mind. The couple, their life shattered by the war, are parting, though still intensely in love with each other. The man is going abroad to seek a new life, but the woman decides to stay and fight the predators off the ruins of her home with nothing to console her but some reg dolls, a rocking chair, a few old love tokens and her memories. The political implications here are both subtle and extremely cunning; indeed, the play can be interpreted to yield two diametrically opposed political messages. But whatever message one chooses to read, the text's potent lyricism and terrible honesty remain deeply moving.

Artistically, the other Arab entries merit little attention: the Syrian was a pale imitation of Brecht in a cold, academic vein; the Tunisian *Ishq Zad* was almost a carbon-copy of Ariane Mnouchkine's Kabuki production of *Richard III*; the Sudanese *Wild Hamed* was a static, rambling narrative with a few flashes of humour; the Yemeni *Elephant* was painfully discordant and amateurish, but nothing could beat the visual muddle and confusion of the Libyan *Sinbad!*

Of the African shows, the Senegalese *Visionary King* was the most visually impressive and most authentically African. It had plenty of colour and energy, interesting lighting effects, a variety of ordinary and exotic costumes, a double set with a painted guaze partition, some very good acting with intermittent spells of wonderful African dancing of the highest calibre.

The Ivory Coast's *The Man with the Face of Death* started as a realistic, intense family drama, with turbulent depths, then suddenly changed key, jolting us onto an unexpected expressionistic plane. With the physical intrusion of death as a painted clown, what had seemed like a very serious drama with a subtle political import was thrown out of joint and teetered dangerously on the edge of farce.

The Camerounian *Sein-T'es Pris* was a thinly-disguised political parable about the economic exploitation of Africa, projected through the original and striking theatrical image of a woman with two enormous breasts who is treated by her husband literally as a cow, down to putting a halter round her neck and chaining her to the wall. The production, however, was generally feeble and failed to exploit the elements of absurdity and cruelty inherent in the situation.

By the time I came to the end of my compulsory viewing schedule I was in danger of falling prey to incurable depression. The Indian Kathakali dancers were my salvation. Their beautiful stylised ritualistic movements, their gorgeous drummers, sumptuous costumes and fascinatingly intricate and exotic make-up transported me into a realm of pure art and transcendental beauty, putting a safe distance between me and a mad, mad world.

Wilde in Earnest

I have often thought that Oscar Wilde himself was his own best artistic creation. None of his fictive characters matches the flamboyant theatricality of the public persona he elaborately cultivated and projected and none his nine plays, serious or comic, has the riveting dramatic impact of his own short life and career.

The ambivalence of his identity, political, sexual and social, would alone make him intensely interesting. But add to this his dangerous flirting with the upper classes and baiting of the Establishment, his flippant flouting of Victorian mores, his brilliant mixture of brittle wit, verbal brio, Latin elegance and Irish sentimentality and, above all, his meteoric rise to fame and equally meteoric crash and you get a fascinating picture of a man of almost tragic proportions.

Like a modern Shakespearean Fool, he was a social outsider accepted into the bosom of fashionable society as an entertainer. His sharp tongue was given leeway and his gibes and quips tolerated as fortifying, immunizing vaccines so long as he knew his limits and did not forget his station. But the poor fool forgot himself and in a mad spell thought he really belonged. He embraced the callow aestheticism and moral liberties of the upper classes; but being a novice, un-

schooled from birth in the subtleties of the social game, he stepped on everbody's toes. He took the game too earnestly, making it publicly into a way of life and an existential pursuit. That was his tragic mistake. He forgot that the very existence of the upper classes, their elgant way of life, their fictions and social charades, depended vitally on their championing of the established order with its core of middle class morality.

Wilde had a high ride for five years. But in 1895 'society' seemed finally to wake up to the dangerous political implications of his aesthetic revolt. Suddenly, the darling of the upper classes, who embraced and celebrated their ideology wholeheartedly in defiance of the ordinary and philistine, became a social menace and public enemy number one. And thanks to the zealous efforts of the Maquess of Queensberry and his powerful friends, what had passed for centuries as perfectly permissible and rather stylish sexual abberration was transformed into a lethal weapon of destruction.

Within three months of two hit productions of *The Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest,* he was pilloried in a vicious public trial for sodomy, dragged through the mud of public humiliation, sent to prison for two ignominious years, then, in Terry Eagleton's words, 'washed', impecunious, 'on the Rue des Beaux Arts cadging drinks from old pals!' He finally sailed off into 'the artifice of eternity', in utter penury, plagued with 'ulcers, abscesses and gumboils' and deaf in one ear.

Reading Wilde's plays at college, back in the sixties, in blissful ignorance of their social context or their author's life, I found them boring and inane, despite their surface brilliance. They struck me as pale imitations of the 17th century Comdey of Manners without the bite of a Wycherley or the elusive dark depths of a Congreve. Coming to them later, however, against a background of Wilde's biography and other writing I could grasp their political significance as subversive thrusts against the patriarchal, capitalist system, its pervasive logophallo-centric codes and pharisaism.

Most productions of Wilde's comedies have tended to dilute or completely efface that aspect of his work. That trend, however, shows signs of change. The Century Theatre's recent production of *The Importance of Being Earnest,* which visited Egypt last week, was a wel-

come and refreshing change. Director Kevin Robinson, of Irish provenance himself, did his best to foreground the elusive political subtext without damaging the brilliant surface. He achieved this rather cleverly by defamiliarizing initially the world of the play to emphasize its manufactured, artificial quality. The two sets, designed by Marjoke Henrich in the style of Art Nouveau, place the characters, whether in the drawing-room or the garden, in an extremely ornate, stylized and artificial setting of painted flowers and trees and flat patterns of writhing plants. They speak English and talk of London and Hertfordshire, but the England they inhabit has been made to look on the stage strangely like a Chinese painting or the intricate patterns on some oriental carpets.

Throughout the perfomance, the stage picture weighs on our eyes and consciousness, acting as a silent commentator of the Brechtian type, constantly undercutting the verbal texture and effectively alienating the characters from our sympathies. The two sets complement each other, creating in their succession an oppressive sense of deadness and a feeling of claustrophobia. Indoors or out of doors, nature has been possessed, reified and hoarded, just like wealth and privilege. Indoors, we see it dead and frozen in painful profusion and confusion on the wallpaper of Algernon's drawing-room, and in John Worthing's country garden it has been squeezed dry and flattened into a soulless wooden existence.

The cunning, political, anti-capitalist message transmitted visually by the stage-design was further bolstered by the studied, carefully calculated woodenness and marionette-like style of the acting. Movement was, understandably, cut down to a minimum, for in this fragile, cardboard world the production portrays, any real vitality would be disastrous. The movement was either languid or selfconsiously drawling and measured for effective self-display, with intermittent bouts of nervous jerkiness. As for the vocal delivery, I do not know if it was by chance or design, but I noticed a general tendency among the actors of not framing Wilde's epigrams and witticisms. They invariably cut short the audience's laughter by rushing on to the next thing without pause. This had the effect of further toning down the characters' appeal.

To further crystallize the message of his production, Kevin Robinson worked on the text, pruning away many a sentimental bit, toning

down the romantic scenes between Cecily and Algernon and intelligently punctuating them with Algernon's resentment of Cecily's ruffling of his hair and his quick, impulsive straightening of it every time.

Some scenes and characters were removed for purposes of economy and compactness like the proposal of Chasuble to Prism, the episode of the lawyer, Lady Bracknell's marriage sermon to Prism and the character of Moulton, the gardner. The most important change in the text, however, and the one most vital in underlining its political message was Robinson's merging of Merriman, the butler, and Lane, the manservant, into one character and one condensed symbolic presence of the working-classes.

To focus this presence and give it potency, Robinson changed the opening of the play. Instead of the master playing the piano and the servant commenting on it, the servant treats us to a melodious air and Algernon tries to imitate him, sawing at the violin most discordantly and treating the bow as a sword and the whole thing as a fencing match. Throughout the performance, we are never allowed to forget the presence and difference, of this representative of the silent working majority, and, at the end, when all the masters freeze into a family photograph, he comes forward once more with his violin to treat us to more music and, perhaps, tell us that he and his kind are the people who can keep art and nature alive.

How much of this messge is Wilde's and how much is Robinson's is debatable; the argument is equally strong on both sides. One thing, however, the Cairene audience were unanimous about and that is the imaginative freshness and technical brilliance of the production.

Fresh Encounters

A story-line, however flimsy, has always seemed to me an essential feature of children's theatre; in most cases, however, it turns out to be a major source of weakness. The stories are often dull, naive or cloyingly moralistic; they use a narrow range of subjects and keep on dredging up, again and again, the same old hackneyed character types. More insidiously still, they tend to pressurize the child into thinking like everyone else and, by praying on his/her natural fear of not belonging, or being rejected, they subtly manage to foster in the children a passive, conformist attitude to the world and a static, conventional view of it. Rare indeed is the children's show which encourages the child to explore life without prior assumptions, see it from different points of view and make his or her own conclusions about it. And such a show was Rene Quellet's at El-Samir theatre last week with the help of four Egyptians.

There was no story here; ordinary people in ordinary everyday situations, relating to each other and the world in a variety of ways. Mime was the principal vehicle of communication with some slapstick and clowning and the bare minimum of words. The art and artistry were craftily masked; the show looked at first deceptively spontane-

ous and somewhat haphazard with the items following each other in quick succession like numbers in a revue, or a rapid sequence of shots in a crazy silent movie. Soon, however, the pattern of the work and its calculated rhythm made themselves felt.

The show fell neatly into two corresponding parts, each with a dominant theme, played in many hilarious and original variations. The first explored human relationships and interactions through a series of short, quick chance encounters between people which uncovered the whole spectrum of emotions that control our response to the Other. Love, charity, solidarity, hatred, jealousy, hostility, aversion, aggression, you name it; the whole gamut was run through. The children seemed to be enjoying themselves tremendously, and while they squealed with laughter, they were being taught in a simple yet sophisticated manner about people, human contacts and the complexity of life. What is more important, they were getting acquainted with a freer mode of perception, more real and tolerant than the dogmatic stratification of people into good and bad, and were encouraged to revel in the richness and multiple variety of life.

Short and flashing as the encounters were, some lasting only thirty seconds or less, Mr. Quellet and his team seemed to have spent a lot of care and imaginative zeal over them. Indeed, some encounters were so sensitively worked out that they formed perfect little theatrical metaphors of substantial human depth. In one such scene, two blind people meet, a European man (Quellet himself) and a Egyptian woman (Minha Zaytoun); their sticks cross and they start feling each other for recognition, but fail. Suddenly, they exchange their dark glasses and their faces beam with recognition. When they recover their own glasses, they lose contact and each goes his separate way.

In another encounter of equal depth, subtlety and sophistication (and also brevity), the same woman, now cursed with a twitching arm, meets Quellet going in the opposite direction. They stop and shake hands; the twitches cease, but resume when their palms unclasp. The sequence is repeated three or four times. They pause, contemplate their different roads, then go off, hand, in one direction. It was an eloquent plea for human sympathy and intercultural harmony without a hint of sentimentality.

On the obverse side, however, human contacts can prove burdensome and quite sticky. In one encounter, a boy (Yahia Ahmad) meets a girl (Amina Salem). When they shake hands, their palms stick together. With great difficulty they peel them off, only to find their other hands stuck and they keep getting entangled until they are rescued by Magdi Kamel and Minha Zaytoun. The newcomers, however, get literally stuck each to one of the couple. Isn't that the story of life? Mr. Quellet finally appears to disentangle and free everbody and is left alone on the stage with his own two hands stuck together! Other encounters figure the power struggle between individuals, the gullibility of boyfriends and fickleness of sweethearts and other such 'grown-up' themes. Mr. Quellet seems to uphold the principle that you can talk to children about anything, if you know how. And he does, with fascinating results.

By way of interval between the first and second parts, Quellet, or rather his magnificent hands, gave us a vivid display, under a singgle spotlight, of fish encounters underwater in an item called 'life in the depths'. It achieved a smooth transition to the second part and its major theme: encountering the physical world and exploring its potential. Here, the film of deadening habit and familiarity was removed from the most mundane objects of daily life. The utility of an object, its ordinary use which defines its identity, was temporarily cast aside and imagination was given free reign to invent other identities for it. In one memorable episode, which could have come straight out of Ionesco, a simple, homely broom is gradually transformed through mime from a symbol of drudgery, female oppression and exploitative soul-killing labour, into a symbol of beauty, leisure and art. Two children (Yahya and Magdi) find it lying limply on the floor and start playing with it, dressing it up in the fanciful hues of the imagination.

It successively assumes the characters of guitar, wind instrument, telescope, bath-brush, a spear, a machine-gun, etc.... Suddenly, the aproned, diligent mother walks in, adonishes the children, snatches the broom and proceeds to sweep, restoring the broom to its humble, utilitarian identity. The aesthetic value and imaginative power the children have discovered in its shape seem completely lost on her. But not quite. Something of the magic lingers still in the shadows of the dismal kitchen, for the mother suddenly pauses, contemplates the broom,

as if she is seeing it for the first time and her face lights up. She leaves off sweeping and waltzes out with the broom held as a guitar.

Another unforgettable episode in that second part was the Man and the Drill. Funny as it was, in the manner of Chaplin, it bore a bitter comment on the interchangeability of men and machines in our modern industrial civilization. In the first shot, the man and the invisible drill seem to be one; you can't tell who is operating whom. Suddenly, the man lifts up his hand from the machine to shake hands with an acquaintance, and the jerky rhythm of the drill is transmitted to the acquaintance, leaving the drill and its operator motionless. The energy keeps changing hands until it finally comes back to the worker in the from of a hand-shake and, suddenly, as before, the imaginary drill and its worker jump back into life.

There were other episodes, equally haunting, and I would advise you to see them for your self when the show, which is currently touring the provinces, comes back to Cairo on 29 November. I do not claim that the children with whom I saw it on 13th Nov. have unlocked all the mysteries of Mr. Quellet's subtle art, or captured all its complex significances. I am not even sure that I, personally, have succeeded in doing that. But I am sure they had a whale of a good time, and so did I.

Sayyed Darwish Theatre:
19th Dec. 1991

A Taste of Vintage

Like wine, good plays seem to improve with age. In Egypt, however, we do not get many opportunities to sample such delicacies. Vintage drama, imported or home-grown, is rare on the Egyptian stage and has been practically out of circulation since the seventies.

The '67 defeat seemed to bring in its wake a tidal wave of tawdriness which swamped every corner of our artistic life. The Academy of Arts' ballet company and symphony orchestra, nurtured in the sixties, receded behind the scenes to starve in peace and quietly disintegrate. The acting profession dressed in motley and drenched our stages in a veritable flood of sloppy comedies, slovenly revues and slipshod vaudevilles. The professional theatre, privately sponsored or state-subsidised, diligently surrendered to the temptation of quick profit and slatternly ease. Cheap instant brews and weird, freakish concoctions became the order of the day.

Only lately has the Academy of Arts (which has long subscribed, through its sheepish silence, to the general trend) woken up to its responsibility and set about redressing the balance. Its recent ballet and opera productions have gone a long way towards salvaging its rep-

utation as the champion of the arts and its newly founded theatre ensemble may prove the salvation and redemption of the art of acting.

The new ensemble, which is the brainchild of the Academy's president Fawzi Fahmi, himself a playwright and professor of drama, was launched onto the sluggish waters of our cultural life with quite an éclat at the big hall of the Opera House last week. Its permanent home and public venue however will be the Academy's Sayyed Darweesh Hall.

The inaugural work of the ensemble's career was Albert Camus' *Caligula*, an existentialist patchwork or collage of old classics. Lord Byron's satanic, incestuous Manfred is here superimposed over Faust, Hamlet, Romeo, Julius Ceasar, Macbeth, Lear, Nero and Othello. No wonder camus described his variegated skit in the preface to the American edition as an actor's virtuoso piece.

Fawzi Fahmi chose director Saad Ardash to supervise and conduct that dramatic enterprise and picked out film star Nour El-Sherif, a brilliant Academy graduate, to take the leading role. Curiously, the obvious clash between the conservative timidity and traditional reserve of the former and the passionate rebelliousness and romantic abandon of the latter worked, producing a theatrical experience of real fervour.

Ardash gave us the text *in toto*, no mean achievement in view of the current rage for hacking and mutilating the classics in the name of experimentation. The four acts were merged and divided into two fast-moving parts with one interval. Occasionally, the vibrant allegro of the tempo would slow down to a thoughtful andante to frame the text's philosophical puzzle and its tragic implications and then pick up speed and rush headlong.

As the scenes cascaded, we were tossed along with the actors among the turbulent waves of Camus' black humour, searing wit and violent mad despair. Our life-line was the magnificent Nour El-Shrif who bitterly swung with the dexterity of a veteran trapeze acrobat between the extremes of a passionate thirst for immortality and the powerful frustration of a decimating nihilism.

To foreground Caligula's arid loneliness and his agonising sense of void, stage-designer Sabri Abdel-Aziz left the stage bare, dressing it on both sides with grey, flimsy drapes, embroidered with long, ser-

pentine ropes, as if to translate visually Caligula's existential fetters and his crazy dream of shackling the sky to the sea and merging them into one element. On the backdrop, which occasionally projected the image of a stormy sky, with dark glowering clouds, a large artificial white moon hung vapidly as if to mock Caligula's elusive symbolic moon.

The other props were a large table with a red velvet cloth (an obviously loaded sign), a wine-coloured curtain limply slung underneath the glaring moon, a white metal gong and a matching glittering throne on swivelling wheels. The last item was sadly reminiscent of Captain Kirk's seat in *Star Trek* and reminded me of the horrors of a dentist's chair.

Mr Abdel-Aziz overdid the use of the circle motif in his design. Apart from the silly, lowering moon at the back, the grim-looking gong and the noose-like circle at the head of the glittering throne (through which Nour El-Sherif kept dangerously poking his head), all the actors' costumes bore a circle motif of sorts, in one form and place or another! Nour's performance, however, a triumph by any standards, bore us along, making us forget all the ridiculous circles together with the muddled lighting plan which excelled in dimming the actors' faces and distracting our attention with its riotous profusion and haywire metamorphoses. The ballet interludes and interspersed movement sequences were at best redundant, if not infuriatingly obtrusive. Some performances were dismally laboured or miserably atonal; some actors missed the point completely and swaggered onto the scene as if they had wandered there by mistake; the vedette, Elham Shaheen, was a sorrowful miscast (she was simply too radiant and too luscious to be convincing as the ageing mistress), and the musical underlining of certain key words and phrases was incredibly puerile.

Nour El-Sherif, however, patched up all the rents and plastered over the cracks. And if that production had given us nothing but Camus' text and Nour's thrilling performance, it would have been quite well worth the effort and the expense.

The Free Theatre Festival :
26th Dec. 1991

Acting Against Great Odds

For the second year running, the starved and struggling Egyptian fringe actors have made it. Against great odds, they have taken arms against a sea of troubles and though by opposing they are still a long way from having ended them, they have at least launched their second festival this week and invaded the stronghold of the National Upstairs and overrun the Avant-garde theatre.

The story of those magnificent men and women, with their 'flying' dreams, was told on this page months ago in a lead story entitled 'A Place Under the Sun'. Their fortunes have not changed since; life is still very arduous and cash in very short supply. The Actors' Guild, which gave their festival legal protection both this ear and last, still denies them membership; the Ministry of Culture still refuses to give them even token financial support and the Arab Artists' Union which last year contributed the measly sum of LE250 towards the cost of the festival chose this year to shut its ears to their urgent pleas. A place to perform was all they were given by the government .

But they remain undaunted. Over a period of months, they met twice weekly at the Theatre Magazine to plan their second encounter, as they prefer to call it, reaching deep into their pockets, almost to the

last penny, and doing everything themselves. The division of labour here is an unheard-of luxury.

Learning from last year's experience, they took great care to improve the general artistic standard of their shows and kept well away from the Opera with its haughty airs and tough security men. After a lot of shilly-shallying, they were allowed to use the small hall of the National and the big hall of the Avant-garde theatres for one week from 6 to 9 o'clock only. This meant more work since two different performances had to be accommodated daily at each theatre in that short space of time; it also meant more money, which came out of the artists' pockets, to pacify the grumbling resident theatre workers and technicians. A very tight schedule was prepared and so far it has run smoothly with only minor alterations.

Most of last year's troupes, like Encounter, The Light Troupe, The Protestors and The Visionaries, were there with new, ambitious production; there were also some newcomers with names as interesting as Shrapnel, The Scream, The Mirrors, Psychodrama and The Misaharati. There were fifteen in all, giving us some of the most exciting theatrical fare we have had this year.

The festival chose the theatre of the late Yussef Idris as its central theme this year in honour of his distinguished contribution to the stage and Egyptian culture in general. Encounter launched the event with a lively and fast-moving production of his *Striped Ones*. Director Khalid Galal who gave us last year Pinter's *Mountain Language* and followed it up with the *Ghosts' Carnival*, which travelled to Avignon, displayed the same vibrancy, technical efficiency and imaginative bravado. It is a production that would have delighted Idris, as said his daughter Nisma, the festival's guest of honour.

Of Idris's other plays, The Visionaries gave *us The Third Sex* and a production of his famous *Underlings* (El-Farafeer) was scheduled but was withdrawn at the last minute when three members of the troupe were suddenly called up for military service. A panorama of some of Idris's plays was also on offer and the Protesters used his three famous articles on theatre as the basis for their production, *An Arab Show*, merging them with *The Underlings* in an exciting collage with disco music, dance and puppets.

Idris's outstanding contribution to the art of the short story was also celebrated in the form of adaptations. The Rebels produced an adequate rendering of his daring *A Table from the Sky* and The Light troupe built their thrilling production, *The Demi-Rebels*, on six short stories. That latter production, in particular, won general critical acclaim and was repeated more than once; it also won itself an offer of a two-week run at the National Upstairs after the festival, a consummation devoutly to be wished!

Apart from the cluster of productions which took Idris as their theme, there were other interesting varieties. Of these Shrapnel's *The Blind*, based on a French text, was at once deeply shocking and breath-takingly beautiful. Its contravention of religious taboo, however, would make a longer run impossible. Another production worthy of mention is *Egyptian Ghosts* which uses Egyptian folklore and ritual in a highly theatrical manner to attack the oppression of women. I was particularly delighted when I learnt that the founder of the troupe, El-Misaharati, and its director, was a woman. About time we had some female directors in the Egyptian theatre, especially if they are of Abeer Ali's calibre!

The other productions, Lamis's *The Bastard Dream,* Bani Mazar's *The Birth*, the Scream's The *Breasts of Tiresias*, the Eagles' *The Game is Still On*, *The Toilets* of the Society of Theatre Artists and *The Master-Servant Dialogue* of the Mirrors troupe did not come up to the standard of either *The Blind* or *Egyptian Ghosts*. Some of them, however, were much better than the general run-of-the-mill state-funded productions and definitely more ardent and vivacious. Whatever their short-comings, they were never boring.

By the time this article is out, the festival will have wound up, the troupes packed up their props and disappeared into the shadows. But not for long. They will resurface in January at the Cairo Book Fair which is hosting all fifteen productions as part of its cultural activities. Over the fair's ten days, they will be performing free from 3-6 pm at The Tent and Saraya Allam Hall. Take my word for it, they are well worth a visit.

The National Upstairs:
2nd Jan. 1992

Many-faced Farfoor

In his *Farafeer* in 1964, Yussef Idris created an authentic image of the typical down-trodden Egyptian and set it on the stage in the memorable figure of *Farfoor*, a theatrical pastiche of the Roman servant, the Italian Harlequin, the Shakespearean Fool and the Qaraqoz of Egyptian puppet-shows. The character also embodied much of Idris's own mercurial personality, impish humour, quizzical musings and, above all, his obsessive sense of the essential theatricality of life.

Idris tried hard, in three subsequent plays, to exorcise his theatrical *doppelganger* and move on to other creations; but Farfoor resisted and persisted. Whenever the dividing line between theatre and life became blurred in the plays, he could be fitfully glimpsed skulking in the shadows or peeping from the wings. In desperation, Idris tuned his back on the stage in the early seventies, devoting himself to fiction and journalism. But Farfoor still dogged him.

In 1984, twenty years after *El-Farafeer*, Idris gave up trying to elude his master-creation and turned round to face him and the stage in a final theatrical wrestle. *El-Bahlawan*, which means at once the acrobat, the rope-walker and the circus clown, is a more openly self-referential work in which the circus becomes a telling metaphor for

the world of journalism and where the stagey fabrication called Farfoor masquerades as the editor-in-chief of a top national newspaper, straddling the two worlds and alternating motley with city sartorial elegance.

Idris and his Farfoor were the theme of the Light Troupe's *Demi-Rebels*. Director Tariq Sa'id set himself the task of tracing the ubiquitous presence of Farfoor in Idris's fiction and of underlining the relation of the man to the theatrical figment of his imagination. Out of four collections punctuating Idris's career as a short-story writer over forty years, he chose eleven stories to illustrate his theme and wove them into an intricate panorama of courage, futility, heroism and absurdity.

The Language of Pain, the story which gave Idris's last collection its title, frames the spectacle at the beginning and end, clearly identifying Idris with Farfoor. The overture carries a poignant, elegiac note. Before a circle of light reveals to us Farfoor dying in the arms of a disciple, a voice rings out in the darkness, asking urgently: 'what has broken you, my once upon a time hero?' It is a question that Idris was often asked in his later years and which prompted many a story.

The dramatisation then proceeds not so much to answer the question but to try and expand it into a general questioning of the paradoxes, complexities and contradictions of contemporary Egyptian life. It also attempts to build up Idris, through Farfoor, into an embodiment of contemporary Egyptian consciousness.

In six speedy, extremely economic and original sketches, Farfoor is paraded in many guises and different settings. He is at first a dazed vagabond, gazing wide-eyed at the crazy spectacles of the streets of Cairo, trying to locate himself in the world and make sense of its anarchic medley of sights and sounds. We then see him on the train, an obtrusive, bumptious traveller, cadging professional advice from his fellow passengers and driving them to desperation. (One of them literally jumps out of the window). Next, he is a pathetic, ridiculous, simpleminded soldier on a travesty of a battlefield, taking war for a game and becoming a hero by accident. Then he is a worker in a factory trying to reconcile American and Russian experts and dying in a parodic cowboy shoot-out between the two. The penultimate sketch takes him to prison where he deludes himself with fantasies of females in the

next cell and, finally, he assumes the garb of a rural Miles Glorious on the village green and ends up getting a dire thrashing from a husband-battering spouse.

The finale takes us back full circle to the beginning. The dying Farfoor makes his final confession in the circle of light. He never went the whole way in his rebellion but always stopped mid-way; compromise was his bane. He never even allowed himself to give full vent to his anger and frustration. The scene is built out of three stories from three collections spanning Idris's creative career and is managed with great restraint and admirable finesse. No melodramatic twitches here, no sentimental declamations.

When Farfoor slips out quietly and suddenly, as Idris did, his disciple closes his eyes and straightens his body. Then, bending his head, he issues a shattering wail of sorrow and anger. The forbidden language of pain is finally spoken. The circle of light, then, goes out and the actors walk in with candles to march out with the body in a silent, funereal procession and come back, not to take their bows, but to snuff out their candles one by one.

The impact of the show was devastating. It may look at first like a gratuitious sequence of banal events, but on reflection it reveals the staggering amount of artistic care that has gone into it. The multiple perspective principle of the overall design and its calculatingly shifting and fragmented look are reflected in the structure of the individual sketches, and the disparate episodes are carefully guided towards a final thematic unity and coherence by discreetly planted leitmotifs and echoes. The funeral, the dog, the rose and washing motifs are some. And throughout, a tough-minded sense of humour, deftly shot through with flashes of real sympathy, is maintained despite the barbed, scatter-shot satire.

A production that defies the familiar theatrical typology, was the verdict of many critics. A new mode of perceiving, organising and giving significance to current experience was here foregrounded against the received, stale and exhausted modes. That was the verdict of another critic.

In each episode, the continuity of the narrative discourse was broken up and jolted into jumbled fragments by sudden swerves of tone, meta-theatrical outbreaks, unexpected pauses, freezings and per-

mutations, forming an original type of theatrical ellipsis. There were also the disconcertingly disrupting intrusions of other texts, contexts and unrelated characters. In the street scene, the heroine of a Fifties film strolls across the stage in a bath robe, humming her familiar ridiculous song and drying her hair. The shot synchronises with a funeral procession. As she rubs shoulders with the mourners, they are jolted onto the plane of historical melodramas. In the train scene, the same actress crosses the stage playing hop-scotch; at the factory she invades the scene with another song and scene from one of the old movies and strolls on later, plucking the petals of a rose in a faint "he loves me, he loves me not" recital. But the most devastating intrusions of all are when she rushes onto the battle scene, looking for her lost dog (an aping of another fifties' film), or when she leisurely crosses the village scene, in the final episode, in sophisticated, posh clothes with a long cigarette-holder.

With a group of magnificent actors, amazingly fresh and free of theatrical cliches, especially the stunning Sayyed El-Roomi (Farfoor) and the diligent Ihab Sobhi, director Tariq Sa'id has recovered for us and the stage that long lost magic we call a sense of wonder and has offered an interesting challenge to common theatrical categorisation.

New Opera Theatre:
9th Jan. 1992

Where Arabs Fear to Tread

For the past three years, the Mohamed Sobhi and Lenin El-Ramli duo have been dealing the state-run theatre one severe blow after another. This year, they have achieved a clean knock-out and roundly confuted the official view that only the state theatre is capable of producing 'serious' art and that private companies can only produce cheap entertainment.

For nearly a decade, members of the Actor's Studio have clung tenaciously to their arduous creed of integrity and independence: they would neither succumb to financial pressure and work within the state's bureaucratic framework, which has proved the burial-ground for many a theatrical talent, nor would they subscribe to the short-sighted, callow, commercial policies of the bastard, hit-and-run private show-biz enterprises.

Their perseverance has finally paid off, in moral and material terms. For two successive years, their *Point of View* has been voted by the national and opposition press as best production of the year and brought them critical acclaim and decent financial returns. Not only has the company kept well afloat, it has also felt sufficiently sure of its

ground to embark on a new venture: a young actor's studio was launched six months ago with a new play and fresh talents.

The new recruits, who number 50, are predominantly graduates with some experience in fringe troupes or university theatre. Some have received formal training at the Theatre Institute or the American University, but this did not exempt them from the intensive, special training course conducted by the indefatigable Sobhi.

The result was a new crop of versatile actors with a wide range of technical, vocal and physical skills and El-Ramli's new play was designed to accommodate as many as 20 of them in major parts.

When everything was nice and ready and in top form, the evergreen *Point of View* was moved to the new second home, El-Fardoos theatre, leaving its place at the New Opera theatre to the young actors to make their debut in another El-Ramli-Sobhi hit.

In Plain Arabic proved an instant success; not only were the critics loud and unanimous in its praise, but in an end-of-the- year opinion poll conducted by *Al-Ahram's* research centre, it came second only to *Point of View* as best play of the year. To top it all, the production brought the company an unexpected windfall and more laurels when it was nominated for the Soad El-Sabah $15,000 annual award for creative and intellectual merit.

Intellectually, the play continues the same daring questioning of Arab culture and its underlining principles and attitudes which El-Ramli had started three years ago in *Ahlan Ya Bakawat* (Welcome, Gentlemen), one of his rare forays into the National Theatre and one of the National's rare hits.

The scene here is London where a group of students from as many as 15 Arab countries are viewed through the eyes of an Egyptian television crew doing a programme on the Arabs in London. The rich tapestry of characters also includes three British males and two females, the best ever presented on the Egyptian stage; indeed, El-Ramli's exceptional flair for characterisation has never been put to better use.

The plot involves an assault on a Palestinian student by some British hooligans, followed by his symbolic disappearance; an ominous visit by the students to a night club which ends in a mugging;

the burning of a bookshop; mysterious calls from kidnappers demanding a fat ransom; the sudden arrival of the Palestinian's fiancée; a project for a play and another for a debate; four love stories, two major and two marginal, besides some casual sex which, predictably, leads to the danger of a wholesale AIDS infection! And if that sounds too dizzying, wait until you have seen the play.

Out of this incredible jumble of incidents and characters, El-Ramli wove an intricate pattern, too complex for words. He held the threads firmly within a coherent conception and, however knotted they became through the multiple, simultaneous interractions and collisions, he deftly extricated them.

What was on trial here was not the West, in the figure of Britain, although it came in for a large slice of criticism; what was on trial here, in very plain and almost too cruel words, was the Arab mind. Not a single bubble was left unburst; all our protective inherited assumptions, verbal blankets and rhetorical shields were rudely stripped one by one and Sobhi's vocal and visual interpretation of the text was not more merciful.

An area of ruthless self-confrontation was revealed here with terrible honesty; and despite the humour and the vitality, *In Plain Arabic* remains a place where Arabs should fear to tread.

Nevertheless, on the 9th of this month, an unprecedented event of deep artistic and political significance will take place. Sobhi and El-Ramli will invade the state-run Opera to receive, on behalf of their private theatre company, a top Arab award for intellectual distinction. And who should play the role of ministering angel but our minister of culture! What a triumph for the Actor's Studio! And what a bitter pill to swallow for the state theatre! One more point to score for our fledgeling democracy.

Cairo International Book Fair:
16th Jan. 1992

Pondering the Future

Despite the dismal cold spell and the exceptionally unhappy timing of the Book Fair this year (which has caught all university students and most schoolchildren at their mid-year exams), the attendance was good. It seems that a lot more people than we think are interested in the prospects for the Egyptian theatre.

The future was our theme, and yet, the youngest members on the panel were in their mid-forties; the rest were big guns from the sixties' theatrical boom. Mohamed Salmawy chaired the seminar and steered it with tact and self-effacing competence.

Galal El-Sharqawi was given the lead and in a short speech, which nevertheless outran his allotted ten minutes, he managed to provide a good political and economic background to the discussion and to highlight the prominent features of the expected future map. The rapid advances in science and technology and the new political world order featured high in his talk and were linked to theatre practices. The theatre of the future, he proposed, would not only be more technically versatile and architecturally flexible, it would also expand its habitual range of themes and topics and become more imaginatively daring. Science fiction which has so far, with very few exceptions, been the

exclusive property of cinema and literature would be appropriated for the stage. With remote control technology, rotating seats and multiple sets, the theatre of the future, according to Sharqawi, would be able to hold its own against cinema and television.

I was thinking how expensive it all sounded when Salmawy invited me to take the microphone. Where can we get the money? And supposing we get it, would it not be better spent on more acting schools, and better training? For the Egyptian theatre to have any future at all, I said, what was urgently needed was more freedom and a better system of subsidies. The present emergency laws are simply too crippling, not to mention the danger posed by religious fundamentalism. If we gave our young people of the theatre more room for action and a wider breathing space, we would not have to worry about the future. They would take care of that.

Ali Salem, the well-known playwright, spoke next and hammered on the same theme; 'the theatre of the future belongs to the future' he said; 'we can only know the present'. He then proceeded, with a lot of wit and humour, to debunk many of the current views concerning 'high' and 'low' art. All theatrical forms and practices are legitimate if they can find an audience, he went on to say, and at any point in history you will find the theatre reflecting the cultural values of the age and its degree of intellectual development. Just as every people deserves its rulers, every society deserves its theatre. Lashing savagely out in deceptively mellifluous tones at all theories and theorists, Salem wound up with a scathing attack on those dreamers who think they can reform the Egyptian mind through theatre. And who said it needed reforming or mending or re-building anyway! 'The bloody cheek' was clearly implied though decently left unpronounced.

Director Fahmi El-Kholi, who heads the state-run Modern Theatre company, managed to rub more salt into our already very raw wounds. Not only did he tease us with recollections of the technologically advanced theatres that he had visited abroad, he also mentioned casually that in a Third World country like Tunisia, theatre students were annually given a choice of free visits to all the countries of Europe, not to mention the USA.

The state-run theatre organisation had already come under a lot of fire. So, naturally, when Karam Mutawi, its head, took the microphone

he made it his business to defend its authority and supposed role as the guardian of artistic value and the arbiter of taste. No private theatre company, he claimed, could undertake the 'heavy industry' work of the state-run theatre with all the risks that it involves. But considering the miserable record of the 'official' theatre over the past few years, his words carried little weight and sent many an eyebrow up in bemused wonder!

We had already come to the end of our alloted time before Mr Mutawi spoke and Salmawy, with his habitual charm, wheedled the Fair's authority into giving us some extra time. But the queries from the floor were flat and most uninspiring. With added dismay, I viewed the hall, and regretted, even more deeply than at the beginning, the conspicuous absence of that substantial bulk of student and amateur theatre practitioners for whom the issue of the future is of deepest concern and to whom it should have been primarily addressed.

The Youth Theatre:
23rd Jan. 1992

Walking Shadows and Poor Players

People may be walking shadows and poor players on the stage of life, as Shakespeare would have us believe; but the actors who played out a variation on this theme in Mustafa Sa'd's new play *The 30th of February* were blissfully far from poor and were bursting with life and energy.

Starting off from a point outside calendar time, the play proceeds to question and disrupt our traditional concepts of time, reality and identity. The plot outline may seem rational enough: a disillusioned former Marxist has been thrown off balance by the political upheavals both at home and in Europe. Seeing his old world collapsing and unable to sell over or relate to the new one, he finds himself in a desolate no-man's-land and his sense of reality begins to break up. Not only does he believe that he was born on 30th February, he also suffers delusions that he is a dead man. On his birthday, which he celebrates solo, his privacy is invaded by the vivid presences of a few dead comrades who claim him as one of the dead.

Naturally, this sends him haring off to the nearest psychiatrist who, as it turns out, is himself teetering on the edge of insanity. Unlike his patient, the psychiatrist has never involved himself in politics, ded-

icating himself totally to his scientific career and, consequently, living constantly in the shadow of madness. To save his own soul, the doctor commits himself, with frantic passion, to restoring his patient's sense of reality and his faith in the rational order. After many months and sessions and many dangerous slips into the realms of illusion, the patient is declared cured. When the doctor pays him a friendly call a month later, however, he discovers, to his horror, that the man he has been seeing for the past three months had actually died seven years ago! He plays his recorder in a final attempt to save his sanity, but where the patient's voice should have been, there are only blanks. As a last stroke, the room is suddenly invaded by the same mysterious presences who visited the patient in the opening scene and the doctor is firmly assured that he has been dead for a long time!

Without seeing the production, it would not be difficult to give a perfectly logical interpretation of the final twist: it was all hallucination form start to finish; the patient was a figment of the doctor's deranged imagination prompted by a deep sense of guilt and a desire for punishment.

The production, however, directed by the author himself, was calculated to resist such a simple account and fought it at every step. The sudden shifts in mood and tone, the abrupt swings from realism to expressionism to music-hall comedy, burlesque and slapstick farce were deftly used to break up the logical coherence of the narrative by continuously exploding our expectations. At times, indeed, the production seemed in danger of disintegrating into a whirl of scatty images. What saved it ultimately and gave it artistic rhyme and reason was the overtly theatrical mode of production the director opted for. It was as if Mustafa Sa'd had decided to take Shakespeare's verbal metaphor litrally and tell us the story of a man's life in purely theatrical terms, with no concessions.

No narration was allowed here and the characters were presented literally as poor players who could not hold a part consistently or keep from slipping into theatrical cliches. The patient's confused memories and his collapsing sense of identity were played out (in a coarsely amateurish way) on a small make-shift stage, not in the manner of a cinematic, finished flashback, but as a theatrical rehearsal in progress with many objections and interruptions from the psychiatrist and many repetitions. Frequently, the characters would address the sound

and lighting engineers, who sat in full view, and ask them for more light or a more suitable musical accompaniment. The patient and his psychiatrist seemed more and more to inhabit a theatrical everlasting present, at once very real and very fictional. Both the stage design and the seating of the audience contributed to that effect.

The Chamber Youth Theatre, where the play is currently on, is a small intimate hall with a versatile seating arrangement. Mustafa Sa'd and his designer Malaka M. Dawood arranged it to look like a diminutive, mock traditional theatre within a real arena theatre. Half the audience were lined up in rows in the centre facing an Italian-box type of stage at one end while the rest occupied the two upper tiers encircling them on three sides. Facing each other, across the auditorium, a table carrying the doctor's recorder and another carrying his telephone completed the set. These were visibly placed on the higher tier and had the effect of semiotically transforming the whole auditorium into the doctor's clinic. It remained, however, a thoroughly theatrical clinic, tentative, fluid and protean.

The two principal actors, Ashraf Abdul Ghafoor and Ahmad Syam gave excellent performances, well studied and briskly paced. They also established immediate, intimate rapport with the audience the evening I was there. Nevertheless, the show is not without faults. Despite its exhilirating theatricality and bubbling humour, it badly needs some verbal whittling in places to concentrate its energy. I, personally, have found its freight of political moralizing too pretentious and too heavy for comfort.

El-Tali'a (Avant-garde Theatre) :
30th Jan. 1992

Great Expectations

Years of theatre viewing and reviewing have made me extremely sceptical of theories. Invariably, works which arrive on the scene packaged in layers of glossy slogans and heady critical jargon fall short of their promise while the best productions, which are truly explorative and inventive, are usually free of such obfuscating verbal clutter .

For this and other reasons, soon to be made clear, I was far from elated when at the opening ceremony of the *Tali''a's* 'Panorama' of experimental plays I was handed a pamphlet detailing the objectives of the project and its theoretical ramifications. Producing short pieces for next to no money was all it boiled down to. Bur this plain economic fact was made more palatable and, I suppose, respectable, by invoking the awesome, patriarchal figure of Grotowski and his 'poor theatre'.

What was more disturbing, however, was the impressive, but nonetheless fictitious, list of critics' names reported to have taken part in shaping the project. I, myself, was not aware of having done any such thing and I am sure that at least ten of the people mentioned in the list would be equally surprised to read their names there. I could

not help feeling duped and the credibility of the project came under a heavy shadow of doubt. And what I have seen of the 'Panorama' so far has done very little to dispel my doubts.

The best item, as yet, remains tantalisingly incomplete. At the opening and over the following three days, a fragment of Sherif Subhi's mime and movement adaptation of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was shown. It featured a procession of monks with candles, a woman in the agony of labour, with a suitable amount of screaming, more choral screaming and a lot of horrified dashing about at the sight of the deformed baby and a priest who saves the poor creature from being trampled under. Naive and half-baked as it seemed and showing all the faults of a youthful first *oeuvre*, it, nevertheless, carried the stamp of real talent and revealed Sherif Subhi's flair for mood and visual impact. There were were some very interesting group formations and lighting effects and the church organ music, produced on a synthesizer, was exquisite. The influence of Bejart, especially the recent ballet production he brought to Cairo, was unmistakable. But, then, don't first works always betray their sources of inspiration?! For a fuller evaluation, however, Subhi's experiment has to be seen *in toto* and it is not clear as yet when this will be. Another testimony of the haphazard nature of the 'Panorama'.

The second production in the project was *The Man Who Consumed Himself*, an adaptation of a novel by Sun' alla Ibrahim, directed by Sayyed Toleeb. To describe it as a great disappointment would be too kind. It is the kind of show that is guaranteed to put you off theatre for at least two months and has left me with a terrible sense of waste. It was sickening to watch a great acting talent like Mahmoud Mas'ood's being drained and wantonly dissipated in the chaotic muddle of sounds and sights that made up the show. The actors did not seem to understand what was happening, let alone the audience. They wandered onto the scene, as if by mistake, and gibber-jabbered their lines, cutting sorry figures. Actress Amal El-Zohiri, dolled up in a black evening dress and red shoes, made frantic efforts to wheedle us into seeing her as the female rebel the adaptation intended and grew more pompous and less convincing by the minute. The political slogans declaimed at the end were no less ridiculous or vapid than the rape scene of the beginning, while the crucial murder scene of the middle and the subsequent trial were a sorrowful mockery of what

they should have been. Incredulously I recalled the pretentious claims of the pamphlet. Are these the shows that are to represent us in the next Experimental Theatre Festival?!

Next came *Masks of Angels*, a Greek text, clumsily rendered into foreign-sounding Arabic by venerable scholar Ibrahim Hamada. The heavy, simplistic and nauseatingly pronounced moral tone of the original was made even more cloying by the translation. The choice of cast did not make it better either. The quartet of lovers, whose symmetrically schematic relationships make up the play, are all middle-aged. The roles, however, were given to extremely youthful actors, bursting with life and energy and encased in extremely tight jeans. They did their utmost and meticulously executed the instructions of director Gamal Mansour. The audience, however, were doggedly pursued throughout by a dreadful sense of falsehood and raw play-acting. The feel of middle age was definitely beyond the experience regions of these young people and nobody had bothered to take them there on a guided tour. Their physical vitality simply gave the lie to whatever they earnestly professed and the whole thing sounded hollow.

Hollow is the word. The blue and pink lighting. The doubling of the female leading role between Abeer and Lamia, the music and vulgarly obvious denotative set were all hollow. Even Alaa Quka's magnificent performance was hollow. Unfortunately, the obviously fraudulent game of theatre requires the utmost honesty.

What is Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,

That he should weep for her?

Thus spoke Hamlet. As I fled from the theatre, the words pursued me. The insincerity of the whole thing was simply devastating.

The National:
6th Feb. 1992

'Wood' It Were So!

Verse comedies, even of the darker hue, are extremely rare in Arabic literature. Apart from a couple of plays by Ahmed Shawqi and Aziz Abaza, I fail to find any specimens of the genre. Playwright Mohamed Enani, however, seems to favour this form. For the second time running he delves into the Mamluke period – a time of sinister plots and bloody power conflicts – coming up with a quasi-historical comedy of intrigue and mistaken identity. Years of teaching and translating Shakespeare have served the author well, lending him the skill to interweave various subplots and relate them thematically through a central poetic metaphor. It has also taught him to create a rich and varied verbal texture capable of expressing different moods, characters and social classes.

Unlike Shakespeare's comedies, however, and very much in tune with his tragedies, politics here takes centre stage. In both *The Crows* (his first verse comedy, Avant-garde theatre, 1988) and *A Spy in the Sultan's Palace* (which opened last week at the National), an ordinary citizen – a peasant in the former and a carpenter in the latter – undertakes a trip to the palace to complain to the rulers of injustice and economic hardship. In both cases, the journey acquires a symbolic dimension and leads to the birth of consciousness in the two men.

The wheat confiscated by the sultan's soldiers in *The Crows* becomes, in *A Spy*, the wood the carpenter cannot find to practise his trade. In the latter play, however, the plot is complicated by the threat of foreign invasion by the e at the frontier and the carpenter is mistaken for a disguised Tartar spy and accused of murdering the sultan to boot. In a series of situations he is alternately threatened and cajoled and his dazed incomprehension of what is happening produces a lot of hilarity besides the serious political revelations.

With great skill and artistry the author manages to transform this series of comic misunderstandings into a vehicle for a conflict between illusion and reality. The solid wood is slowly transformed into a metaphor for all that is real while the palace pales slowly into a shadowy, insubstantial vision, a 'baseless fabric', of lies, delusions and hollow rhetoric.

The love interest is provided by the romantic figure of an imprisoned princess, a younger and more sympathetic version of Miss Havisham, who insists that the humble carpenter is her long-awaited knight in shining armour, complete with horse. A more cheerful variation is her lady-in-waiting's love-affair with a sailor and a grimmer one, ending in murder, is provided by two scheming and power-hungry cousins. There is also the story of the seamstress, Om-Alia, played in a lower key, like a recurrent refrain. Spurned and betrayed in early youth by the tailor Obayd (a kind of civilian Miles Glorious who suffers from delusions of heroic feats in imaginary battles), she spends the entire play planning the wedding of her imaginary daughter and chasing after the prospective bridegroom, a young apprentice in her shop.

In all cases, whether on the streets or in the palace, and whether the major preoccupation is love or power, reality is seen as a frustrating business which drives people to seek solace in the world of the imagination. Indeed, flying into an imaginary world seems a common malady – a disease that has infected everybody and eaten into their souls like woodworm or dry rot. No wonder then that things as solid and tangible as wood have become a rare commodity!

Director Karam Mutawi has deftly captured this basic idea in his production and focused it in a daring visual metaphor. The illusory nature of reality is conveyed by the total and conspicuous absence of

stage furniture. The throne, chairs and even the princess's *chaise-longue* are presented as wispy swings which descend from above. At various points in the play, the rulers are seen hanging in mid-air, swinging back and forth, a sign of their instability and fragile existence. In contrast to this airy, cobwebby, 'swinging' image, a solid wall in the Islamic style, featuring an old gate of Cairo, forms a backdrop to the street scenes, with a few graceful domes in the background. When the action moves to the palace, it breaks up, seemingly all by itself, into various sections, some of which disappear into the wings while others retreat to the back to make up gates and portals. At the very end of the play, this versatile wall seems to spring into life and moves in to press the actors forward, enclosing them into a claustrophobic structure. The final confrontation between illusion and reality brings it and the whole palace – the curtains, the swings, everything-- crashing down in clouds of smoke. Thanks to Mutawi's conception and lighting-plan and to Sekina Mohamed Ali's design, the various locations seem to dissolve into each other, in a dreamlike manner, and the production flows smoothly without a single blackout.

Karam Mutawi's meticulous sense of form and vivid theatrical imagination were seen at their best in the three still tableaux, reminiscent of Roberts's drawings of 19th century Cairo (made famous today by postcards), which open each act and end the play. They were also eloquently apparent in the movement design, the group formations and the distribution of light.

The acting, a well-judged mixture of the serious and the burlesque, was uniformly good, with flashes of genius here and there – especially in the case of Ashraf Abdel-Ghafour in the role of the carpenter. With great finesse he, quite unostentatiously, brought out all the comic irony of the situation without sacrificing its darker implications or tragic import. Also excelling in their respective roles were Madiha Hamdi as the delirious princess, Salwa Khattab and Midhat Mursi as the intriguing cousins, Fathiya Tentawi and Sa'id Saleh as the deranged seamstress and her errant tailor, Hamza El-Sheemi as the sultan's assassin and successor, Farouk Ita and Maha Yousef as the young amorous couple and, last but not least, Mohamed Abu El-Enein's magnificent caricature, comic yet sinister, of the sultan.

It would be nitpicking, I suppose, in view of the general excellence of the show, to mention that some of the costumes were drab

and shabby, poorly designed or garishly-coloured. The quality of the music, however, cannot be bypassed. It was the major flaw of the production and was, to say the least, monotonous and extremely modest. But then, nothing is ever perfect.

The American University's Wallace Theatre:
13th Feb.1992

Devilish Delight

AUC productions are notoriously tame. Private or public, they tend to play it safe and steer a timid middle course in the realms of sex and politics. In the former, they would not venture beyond Tennessee Williams and in the latter, Brecht would be the limit.

The situation, however, looks like changing. A new spirit is sweeping over the campus and, would you believe it, it is genuinely and boldly feminist! A few months ago I went to see Dana Sajdi's graduation project, a compilation of scenes from Shakespeare, Strindberg and Euripides, figuring Lady Macbeth, Miss Julia and Medea. I was struck then by the uninhibited passion and physical abandon of Sajdi's performance. It was blissfully free of the selfconscious restraint and embarrassing coyness which usually bedevil the rendering of such parts (or any parts that foreground female sexuality) by Egyptian actresses. What was more striking still, and quite exhilarating in its open defiance of established taboos, was the backdrop which sported a large wine-red orchid, cheekily suggesting a female sexual organ. The impact was almost electric.

I was glad to see Sajdi once more last week, but this time in a completely different role. She was a sour bitch in Caroleen Khalil's

production of Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom*, acrid, vengeful, sanctimonious and sex-starved. Almost single-handedly, she brings three innocent women to the gallows, accused of witchcraft, delivers a hasty, sycophantic prayer to the Lord, then rushes out ghoulishly to feast her eyes on the dangling bodies. Later, one presumes, though neither Caryl nor Caroleen show it, she would go back to her safe and cosy dairy to lap up the cream.

Looking at *petite* Caroleen, with her dainty face and saucer-like eyes, I could not believe she could hold so much passion or such radical ideas. Beautiful, privileged and talented (with a major role in Subhi's hit *In Plain Arabic*, playing the English student), and at sweet 21, what could she know of women's suffering at the bottom-end in middle age, of deprivation, social and sexual stereotyping?! The folktale atmosphere, village setting, familiar nursery and incantations, and the old-world charm of Churchill's text do not hide, but rather accentuate, the horror underneath. The moral identity of a woman and her existential truth are revealed as a hazy, controversial business, deeply embroiled in her social status, marital subservience, economic proficiency and her compliance with the inherited norms.

Alice, a rebellious, Lorca-type country girl, saddled with a child of an unknown father and an alcoholic, good-for-nothing mother, still hankering after sex, falls in love with a mysterious gentleman in black who hits the hay with her in a field. She goes to the cunning-woman, a herbal expert and healer (what we would call now a female doctor) for comfort and a love-charm.

To the healer's thatch also comes Betty, the estate owner's daughter, a fugitive who is regularly imprisoned, bled and treated as mad because she refuses to succumb to the courting of an eligible socially approved suitor; there is also Susan, a bedraggled, emaciated, downtrodden and obsequious country wife, with three miscarriages, two children, and pregnant again. At the end of her tether and failing to cope, she comes seeking an abortion. Her deeply ingrained religious sentiments, however, give her no peace and drive her to the brink of mental collapse. Out of guilt, she confesses, in a suicidal drive, to practising witchcraft and her zealous atonement implicates her friend Alice, landing her in the hangman's noose.

Mayar Ramadan looked suitably fragile and thin and the directress dressed her fittingly in pale cream and grey. She was deeply moving as she kept fumbling with her grey smock, twisting and kneading its edges nervously. Betty, too, played by Dalia El-Abd, was befittingly costumed. She swam in a pale greyish-blue dress, three sizes too big at least and looked like a dazed and lost child. Faced with the hangman, she makes peace with society at last and leaves us with the painful image of a woman withering, stultified, but slowly decomposing under the patronage of her wealthy husband - a hollow woman, very much like Eliot's hollow men.

Alice, however, was a tough nut to crack, and so was her mother. Sherine El-Ansari, as Alice, and Sherine El-Semari, as her mother Joan, formed a wonderful duo, radical, revolutionary, unpretentious and, in every move and gesture, thoroughly moving and deeply human. Bleary-eyed, with an unsteady, swinging gait, tousled hair and unkempt, scrappy, colourless clothes, not to mention her slurred enunciation, El-Semari gave an eloquent, convincing, and at times breathtakingly shrewd rendering of a sensitive middle-aged woman, fallen on sad times and vulgarised by want, alcohol and years of conjugal battering.

El-Ansari, dressed in a skin-tight, low-cut black blouse and a deep rusty, copper-tan ragged skirt, seemed as if she had sprung fresh out of Lorca's Granada. She wore a savage, feral look and paced the stage like a caged she-leopard. Her words came out in sudden bursts as if torn out of her guts and her black eyes simmered with a burning rage. Her final, virulent spout of cursing rendered her strangely pathetic and her last words, 'there is no way for us except by the devil', seemed to transfigure her from a common country girl to the saintly Maid of Orleans.

Caryl Churchill obviously had Jeanne d'Arc in mind and the whole play could be regarded as a slanted, saucy, ironical variation on the theme, charged with a suitable dose of hysteria, reminiscent of Arthur Miller's *Crucible*. Alice's blasphemous declaration at the end, her mother's fabricated confession of unholy practices, hurled defiantly with curses in the face of the witch-hunter, the herbal healer's dignified surrender (impressively played by Maissa El-Rifaie, in the spirit of an inscrutable Delphic oracle), and even Susan's humiliating em-

bracing of guilt – all are bitter variations on the theme of martyrdom, exposing its obverse, feminist side.

Intelligently, Caroleen Khalil captured the mood and message of the play and opted rightly for half-tones. The earthy, muted colours of the costumes (craftily manipulated to create many a telling irony, like dressing the really wicked woman in ethereal blue and white and her unmanly husband in off-blue and dusty brown) together with the austerely bare, straw-strewn set and clean, frugal lighting were a visual treat. The music too, strummed on a live guitar, with the help of an amplifier, partook of the general constrained dignity of the show.

The male parts, naturally, in view of the feminist orientation of the play, had to come last. The production, however, could not have materialised the way it did without the contribution of Tamer Amin as the farmer, of Nezar El-Shardawi as the lover, or without Yasser Amr's stage design – or Samir Hoftah's lighting – plan.

With so much depressing news coming from Algeria and with the relentlessly ominous threat of the veil, how wonderful it was to watch the debut of a young female director, and a good one at that!

El-Salam's Experimental Hall:
20th Feb. 1992

Noisome Meddling

Adapting a play for the stage may sound like a contradiction in terms; it is, however a well-known and familiar practice in the Egyptian theatre. It usually consists in picking a foreign text in translation, rewriting it into the Egyptian dialect, giving it a local setting and changing the characters' names. Details which relate to the original setting are naturally removed, together with anything that clashes with the native mores. In extreme cases, however, characters and episodes are removed or added, the basic design is altered and the text is either severely contracted and adumbrated or expanded and padded beyond recognition.

In the old days, before the state-run theatre and the sixties boom which hatched its own native dramatists, this adaptation business formed the life-line of the private theatre companies, providing a constant stream of plays, hastily prepared and instantly consumed. The dramaturges of the various companies, who usually knew English or French, had no scruples about plundering the European theatre for plots or whole plays, or about passing them off as original compositions. Very few bothered to acknowledge their sources and when they did, the term 'based on' was what they used, which, I suppose, is more accurate.

In those days, however, people could still go to the theatre and enjoy a foreign play which has not been meddled with, and a taste for European drama, especially the classics, built up over the years. It was this, perhaps,which encouraged the government in the sixties to set up The World Theatre Company (now defunct) which specialized exclusively in foreign plays. The venture proved a huge success, both artistically and financially. I still remember, with a great deal of nostalgia, such wonderful productions as Chekov's *Vanya*, Lorca's *Alba* and Brecht's *Good Person*. But, as always happens in Egypt, it was too good to last. For mysterious reasons, the company was disbanded or, rather, subsumed under the New Theatre company. This move, together with the fire which consumed the Pocket Theatre, where I watched my first Ionesco and Beckett, and the closing down of The 60-Seats Theatre later on, practically put paid to the hopes of foreign drama enthusiasts.

Adaptation was back in vogue, and the vogue continues still. The number of foreign plays presented without tampering over the past thirty years is stunningly poor and at least two generations of theatre viewers have been deprived of the pleasures of world drama and denied any real knowledge of it. Lately, a few sporadic attempts were made to reinstate it on the Egyptian stage. Last year's *Macbeth* and *Lear* and, more recently, *Caligula* and *The Masks of Angels* may be a prelude to better things. However, so long as the financial reward for directing a play in the state-run theatre remains as measly as it is now, directors will be tempted to resort to the ruse of 'adaptation', and the cash that goes with it, to swell it up.

In this game, the prime loser is the translator whose rights, and sometimes even his name, are frequently ignored. Dr. Ibrahim Hamada was recently complaining to me that three of his translations were used without his getting a penny. The last of these was Mario Fratti's Italian play *The Cage* which opened at the new Small Hall of El-Salam theatre last week.

Like many of its predecessors, this foreign text was hacked down and mangled in the name of adaptation by its director Subhi Yussef. The events which in the original are spaced out over three acts and are carefully orchestrated with the dialogue were crammed into one act, slightly over an hour, and new ones were added. A sexual fantasy sequence was invented figuring Petro's wife Chiara dancing voluptu-

ously to the strains of an oriental tune to seduce his brother Cristiano, a manic-depressive intellectual who has locked himself up in an iron cage for the last three years. In the play, the two merely exchange a kiss across the bars of the cage. In the production, however, she slips into the cage to sleep with him. Another spicy addition was Petro's sadistic whipping of his wife. The mother in the play becomes in the adaptation an elder sister who resents wasting her youth over the family and is given a violent outburst against her brother. The younger sister, on the other hand (the daughter in Fratti's text), instead of marrying the boy she loves, gets engaged to a ridiculous bore and religious fanatic who forces her to wear the veil. The new concoction was made even more melodramatic and sentimental by the addition of a small boy who doubles as the encaged intellectual in childhood and as a neighbour who keeps calling on him to chat and is repeatedly driven away by family. The irony embedded in Fratti's portrayal of the intellectual and his satirical intent were further diluted through giving the hero the name Adam and naming his seductress Zobayda (the temptress of Joseph), by exchanging Fratti's working-class family for a middle-class one, and by representing the cage as a golden, man-size song-bird's cage, not to mention the sentimental music, the slides which projected images of human loneliness and misery to support the intellectual's argument and romantic withdrawal, the final image of the child slipping into another small cage and the general soft and emotive rendering of the intellectual's part, undertaken by the director himself.

In Subhi Yussef's production, Fratti's subtly ironical text was shorn of all its political implications and became a violent domestic melodrama, transmitting a message completely the opposite of the one intended by the author. It may be a better message, of course, from the director's point of view. But then, why not write his own text? Why disfigure and falsify another man's work?

Small Blessings

It was cold and rainy in Mansoura and the bus ride there on the rickety government vehicle allotted us was a terrible punishment. But the lure of a provincial *Lear* was irresistible and, after all, I said to reassure myself, you cannot go very far wrong with *Lear*. You would really have to be a veritable thespian thug and vicious vandal to sabotage the tragedy of the good old king. Besides, I had seen other productions by director Ahmad Ismail and invariably they had been good or at least tolerable. Even if he did nothing but choose a good translation and train his actors to deliver it well, it would be worth all the jolting and bone-rattling.

Well, the translation, by Dr Fatma Musa, was good. But I knew that because I had seen it earlier and not thanks to the actors. In fact, most of the time you could not hear what was being said on stage. Half the actors mumbled their lines and the other half mangled them. Lear fixed his eyes continuously on the ceiling as if addressing some invisible powers there, presumably of superior hearing. The director's warnings against ranting and declamation seemed to have sent him together with Gloster to the other extreme, rendering both inaudible. Edmund delivered his part, nonetheless, like a typical 19th century melo-

drama villain and Cordelia was an infuriatingly soppy damsel in distress. Goneril was audible and tolerable, if a bit wooden. But Regan seemed to entertain the curious idea that evil characters have to dart their eyes disconcertingly about and speak through their noses. Edgar was passable and Cornwall actually good, and though an evil character, he was blissfully free of that obnoxious nasality.

The biggest drop in this very modest cast, however, was the Fool who looked extremely well-fed and had a crashing voice. Rather than provide comic relief, he proved an irritating bore. Most of the time he rendered his lines in the Egyptian dialect, which clashed painfully with Lear's classical Arabic, and occasionally improvised silly jokes or burst into song. What was most inexcucable, however, were the typically Egyptian ballad *(mawwals)* tunes he sang to. They were infuriatingly discordant with the atmosphere of the drama and played havoc with the storm scenes, throwing the audience off completely – a pity, since the director's visual representation of the storm was the one bright spot in the whole production.

Using a number of fans at the back, he made all the blue stage draperies quiver into furrows and ridges, aping the motion of the waves. The stage itself was drenched in a pale blue light with occasional flashes of lightning and rolls of thunder. The whole stage seemed to be swaying with the actors and the effect was visually terrific.

The same thing could not be said of the costumes, which were an odd mixture of the historical and the modern; nor of the general lighting scheme with its garish reds and painful violets. Some visual details, too, were incredibly absurd and pushed the play to the edge of farce. When Gloster is blinded, the whole stage is plunged into darkness and continues so until the end of the scene, or nearly, with the actors' voices issuing from the dark. And given the general mumbling, incoherent status of the vocal delivery here, the scene was doubly frustrating. Throughout the play the characters appear elegantly shod in modern, well-polished footwear and its shine, especially in the storm scenes and particularly in the case of Edgar, becomes literally an eyesore. When Lear casts off his regal robes to roam the bellowing, rumbling heaths, he is well-provided with a thick woollen pullover and modern trousers besides the shoes.

A friend of mine whispered: they keep talking of rags but we do not see any! And how right she was. Even Edgar, as Poor Tom, was unsuitably shod and thickly clad! I wondered if the costume designer had read the play! Or was it, perhaps, simple provincial prudery? - the same prudery which transformed a passionate kiss between Goneril and Edmund into an icy peck on the forehead and made Lear, in the final scene, walk in carrying the white cloak of dead Cordelia instead of her corpse. Physical contact between the sexes is taboo on the provincial stage. You simply have to get round it. It was a heroic feat, the director told me, to get the actress to consent to the icy kiss (which struck me as being nearer a slap). In the case of Cordelia, however, being carried by a man, however old, was quite out of the question. Her reputation in the community would be completely ruined; she would be unmarriageable and, her professional future as a school-teacher would be nipped in the bud.

In cases like this, one has to exercise the virtue of tolerance and stretch it to its limits. Working in the provinces, after all, with amateurs and next to no money, and having to battle against all the deeply-ingrained moral suspicions of theatrical work, is no joke. In different circumstances, Ahmed Ismail, I am certain, would have acquitted himself better. As it is, we should be thankful for small blessings. On the way back, I tried to soothe myself with the thought that in the capital, most of the time, things are not much better. But it was cold comfort.

The American University's Wallace Theatre:
5th Mar. 1992

Utopia in a Cesspool

At a panel discussion a few years ago, someone asked Mohamed Salmawy whether he was influenced in his writing by the theatre of the absurd. 'Do we really have to go that far?' Salmawy quizzed him impishly. 'In Egypt', he went on to say, in a more sober tone, 'we do not have to import the 'absurd' or even look around for it. You will be lucky if you can avoid stumbling over it at every step or bumping into it at every street corner!'

This does not mean that Salmawy has not benefited in his theatre from the writings of such people as Beckett, Ionesco and Genet. With a BA in English literature and two diplomas in theatre from Oxford and Birmingham he could hardly help that. But like all ingenious playwrights, from Euripides and Shakespeare to Pinter and Handke, he has managed to transfigure everything he has learnt into something rich and new and to give it a thoroughly local habitat and hue.

His first play, *I Shall Tell You All,* a metaphysical farce written in the late 1960s when he was still in his early twenties, drew largely upon the 'waiting' situation of Beckett's *Godot*, and depended heavily on the device of intertextuality, alternating dialogue with extracts from the Bible and some familiar English nursery rhymes. The shockingly

inconoclastic nature of the work, however, was wasted on a largely non-English-speaking audience, since the text was written originally in English and performed at the American University in Cairo. It still awaits an Arabic translation.

Salmawy's next venture into the world of theatre was a double-bill in Arabic produced at the Avant-garde and directed by Sa'ad Ardash. *Fout Aleina Bukra (Come Back Tomorrow)* and *Illi Baadu! (Next!)* were instant hits. The simple, daily absurdities of Egyption life were here presented in a quasi-realistic style that soon gave way to a hallucinatory, surrealistic series of images. In the two plays, waiting, both as an idea and as a situation of enduring pain and fugitive expectations, materialises theatrically as a nightmare. What looks at the beginning comfortably familiar is soon invested with horrible implications that cast terrible shadows.

In Come Back Tomorrow, a young intellectual, seeking a government stamp for his travelling documents, is slowly driven to the edge of insanity and despair and finally sadistically raped in one of the most daring and memorable scenes in Egyptian theatre. Stripped bare by his mealy-mouthed civil service torturers, he is crucified on the wall and branded horribly with the official stamp on every part of his body, sensitive or otherwise.

In *Next!*, the long, endless and eternal queue becomes a concrete, visual metaphor for existential despair and unyielding political frustration.

Murderer on the Loose, his first full-length play, followed aftera spell in prison for political dissension. It contained a lot of autobiography and was obviously, in one sense, an attempt to come to terms with the disappointments, betrayals and many painful experiences of early youth. Salmawy, however, was able to transmute this intensely personal material into art and fashion a work of intricate formal complexity. By the end of the play, the prison cell which forms the setting becomes a haunting riddle, at once a tomb and a womb, a satirical image of society and an existential hell.

Salome, a political reworking of Wilde's play, came next and was given a beautiful production in the open air with a stunning performance from actress Raghda in the title role. Technically, however, it was less fastidious than *Murderer* and its overpowering lyricism

brought it closer to the nature of an oratorio. The image of the dark well, where the Baptist is incarcerated, however, formed a subtle thematic link with the earlier plays, replaying in a different key Salmawy's obsessive Hamletian metaphor of life as one big prison made up of many cells and dungeons.

In Two Underground (originally *Itneen Fi-l-Balaa'a* or *Two Down the Drain)*, the metaphor surfaces again in a painfully grotesque manner. Arcadia in a cesspool would be a more apt title. Starting from the cosily familiar situation of 'boy meets girl', Salmawy spins a tale of nightmarish horror and farcical despair. When Mona and Hassan (two significant names, one suggesting hope and the other, beauty) fall down an open manhole, in broad daylight, and land in a deserted, unused sewage cistern, they find themselves sailing with Noah, in his Ark, down history and myth in search of holiness and purity. The underground world where they fall is not a fall from grace in the biblical sense, but rather an escape from a world overrun with sewage. As in *Murderer*, an authentic consciousness of human history and suffering sprouts in the dungeon and is fed by all the neglected, unpolluted subterranean streams.

The horrors of the voyage, however, are very much there. After all, as Eliot said, 'mankind cannot bear too much reality'. But Salmawy's real achievement was presenting this highly sophisticated vision in a thoroughly enjoyable, accessible and deceptively simple theatrical composition. It was extemely funny too. At the National Theatre, where it was first presented a few years ago, the ripples and stormy claps of laughter physically reproduced the sensation of being tossed among Noah's stormy seas.

For Hassan and Mona, however, there is no resting place, no shore. The play ends with an apocalyptical vision of doomsday, but, absurdly, shorn of all elevating grandeur. This is neither the time or place for soul-saving heroism. This is Egypt in the 20th century where a million children roam the streets of Cairo in utter hopelessness, and where the threat of falling down an open manhole and going physically and spiritually down the drain is a literal (and not a metaphoric) possibility.

Watching Salmawy's searingly existential and politically tongue-in-cheek punning on the play's title on the opening night at the Na-

tional, I was invaded by a host of oppressive memories. But the one memory that stuck in my mind was a scene from a folktale where a girl faces a dry ditch and is required to fill it with her tears so that the image of her lover can surface and shimmer on the waters.

And it did, in the two prroductions of the play I have seen so far. Ahmed Zaki's interpretation, at the AUC last week, was a much watered-down version of the text. Many scenes and characters were ruthlessly omitted. The action was pared down and the plot adumbrated. The acting, lighting, and stage design by Dr Mohamed Hamed Ali, however, more than made up for the textual loss.

Against a telling background of grey and black, with a gaping large circle at the top of a few steps, embodying at once the idea of the 'Fall' and the promise of the ascent, Mona El-Tunsi gave a memorable rendering of her part, funny, convincing, urgently pressing, and with a touch of neurosis. Her beautiful voice too was an added bonus. Ibrahim Saleh as Hassan, the beautiful and good (as his name suggests), on the other hand, was too lukewarm. He did not seem to realise the enormity of his situation.

Nevertheless, he was extremely pleasing to the eye and the ear, and with a little more grinding into the facts and realities of history and the modern Egyptian political scene, he might go places.

Khalid Abu El-Naga doubled successfully as the *Ma'zoun* (marriage-contractor) and Dr Labib, the university don. It was sheer delight to watch his performance in both capacities. Omar El-Muizz, too, acquitted himself well, with plenty of panache, as the censorious, officious, official government spokesman. The two investigators, Arig Ibrahim and Hanadi Imam, popping out of dilapidated, rubbish-bin-like escretoires on both sides of the stage, with hard, plastic yellow helmets, looked like deranged firemen and crazed, haywire robots. Ahmed Abdeen and Muhi El-Arabi were convincing in their triple identity as chorus and angels of mercy. As the two gardeners, Hebeish and Eleish, they brought well-cued acting and delightfully human expression to a play otherwise peopled by harsh, inhuman demons.

One thing I regretted after the show. The names of lyricist Shawqi Khamis and the forcibly anonymous music composer did not appear on the printed programme. A shame: they provided excellent backup to an excellent show.

The Feast in the Fast

A friend of mine once called Egypt 'a land of paradoxes' and the description strikes me as particularly apt in Ramadan. For a whole month the country keeps swinging between the extremes of fasting and feasting, physical deprivation and extravagant indulgence. Nor is the feasting limited to the table. An avalanche of television programmes, especially prepared for the holy month, is suddenly loosed upon us and the various branches of the Ministry of Culture engage in mortal battle over our souls. The result is a glut of shows, lectures, seminars and other functions.

In the field of theatre alone, six new plays at least have suddenly erupted on the scene, and most of them musicals. At the Opera, Hussein Gomaa is directing pop star Iman El-Bahr Darwish, the grandson of Sayyed Darwish, in a production of his grandfather's *Scheherazade*. Sayyed Darwish himself is the subject of another musical sponsored by the Cultural Palaces Organisation. At the Ghouri Palace, director Samir El-Asfouri is putting the final touches to a musical adaptation of Ionesco's *Macbett*. In Giza, three new plays have opend at the Small Floating Theatre, the Barageel Roman Theatre and the Badrasheen Cultural Centre.

The choice is certainly plentiful, since the provinces too have chipped in with a substantial contribution to this theatrical feast. Some private companies, it is true, have closed down for the month, but the state theatre, the National, Comedy and Modern are running as usual, contributing five plays between them.

To an outsider, this intense outburst of theatrical activity might seem at odds with the ascetic spirit of the holy month. It might also seem irreconcilable with the prevailing, but not very accurate, idea of Islam's hostility to all performing and representational arts. To the ordinary Egyptian, however, there is no contradiction. After all, records of dramatic scenes and productions at religious festivals exist, dating from the Old Kingdom. And though Egypt did not remain Pharaonic and was destined to change its cultural skin many times over, the Egyptians somehow managed to preserve their *joie de vivre* and ebullient, lustful celebration of life. Whatever creed they embraced they soaked it in their cultural heritage and softened it with their traditional tolerance.

Theatre continued under the Greeks and Romans and persisted after Islam in the form of travelling bands of actors, singers, dancers and story-tellers and in the form of the puppet and shadow plays. At every country fair, religious festival, or market day, these artists would appear to provide entertainment in a secular vein, not altogether free of coarseness or ribaldry, and side by side with them, the dervishes would chant and whirl theatrically in their distinctive costumes.

This tradition of combining religion with popular forms of art survived well into the twentieth century and long after the appearance of the Western-style theatre companies. And judging by the theatre bills available from the twenties and thirties, Ramdan seems to have been a period of intense theatrical activity and competition. The famous circus of Abdou Soliman was a popular attraction during that holy month and was held in the Sayeda Zeinab district, close to the mosque that bears her name. El-Hussein district, too, was a famous goal for entertainment and pleasure-seekers, with its many marquees and sheds. Music-hall entertainment was also available during that month in the small theatres that dotted the Nile bank at Rod El-Farag.

With that long tradition in mind, I found myself bitterly regretting the Ministry of the Interior's decision to cancel the annual Ramadan marquee at Hadiqat El-Khalideen, in Darrasa near El-Hussein. But for those who occasionally get sick of the small box, many consolations are still left.

Motril, Andalusia:
16th Apr. 1992

Revisiting Paradise Lost

On the map, Motril looked quite close. But to that small coastal town on the southern slopes of Sierra Nevada, I had to change flights three times (missing one connection in Madrid), then travel, quite dazed, along the coast from Malaga (where no one met me) for an hour and a half, alternately dozing off and chatting in a crazy mixture of Spanish, French and English with my cab driver. At the Casa de la Palma, the festival's headquarters in Motril, I was bundled into a car and carted off out of town to a small hotel on the outskirts of the village of Saloberenia, seven kilometres away.

When I put down my small suitcase I realised that 24 hours had elapsed since I left home. But the trip, though devilishly exhausting and sadistically badly-organised, was to prove well worth it: not only were the plays good (though few in number) and the seminars provocative and fruitful, the company too was warm and genial.

There was also a sense of timelessness. The silence of the green hills sloping down to the sea, the narrow winding paths leading to miniature white dwellings, the derelict ruins of old castles and the scattered lonely towers, one of which adorned the garden of our small secluded hotel, all conspired against me. Stepping out on to my balcony felt like stepping into the past.

I do not remember the last time I experienced so vividly that heady, exhilarating feeling of being liberated from clock time, of swimming weightlessly in an eternity that holds time in an eternal present. The feeling was inevitable, I suppose: no Arab can visit Andalusia without experiencing a sense of the holiness of the place or feeling like a pilgrim. In my case, the timing of my visit made it even more intensely emotional. It came at a time when the whole of Spain and the energies of its people are bent on building bridges with the past across 500 years of history.

Wherever you look, the slogan "Al-Andalus 500 anos" greets your eyes. The Islamic contribution to the cultural heritage of Spain during Arab rule is currently being celebrated in Granada. An exhibition of Islamic art in the 14th and 15th centuries recently opened at Alhambra palace, with exhibits from all over the world. The Egyptian contribution there is shamefully and incomprehensiby meagre: an old handwritten copy of the Qur'an sent by the Egyptian Book Organisation and nothing from the Museum of Islamic Art! A similar negligence or indifference also threatens to mar the Egyptian presence at Expo 92 in Seville. While many countries of lesser cultural status than Egypt are represented in separate, spacious pavilions, some of them impressively and expensively designed, Egypt will be crammed in a small, modest pavilion with Jordan and Syria. The Moroccan pavilion, on the other hand, designed as a miniature of Alhambra, and still under construction when I was there, promises to be a wonder and a fitting tribute to a golden past and a paradise lost.

In Motril, our theme was the present and the future, the theatre of today and tomorrow. But the past was ubiquitous: the symbolic reconciliation ceremony between Spaniards and Jews sent my thoughts back to 1492 and the fall of Granada; in the two–day seminar at the end of the festival, dedicated to "the memory of the peaceful co-existence of all faiths in Spain", the tolerance of Arab rule over both Jews and Christians was repeatedly referred to; in the ceremony which preceded the first session of the seminar, Mr Miguel Branco, the Mayor of Motril, greeted the participants - Jews, Christians and Muslims - and declared his firm support for the Motril festival and the International Institute for Mediterranean Theatre (IITM), which sponsors and organises it, then ended up by paying homage to its moral and cultural goals of promoting mutual understanding, cooperation, tolerance and peaceful co-existence among all cultures, creeds and races. Dr

Subhi Ghosheh, the Palestinian former Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem (who lives in exile after being forcibly expelled by the Israelis in 1972) looked back to the past, citing examples of Arab tolerance towards the Jews (before they were expelled by the Christian kings in 1492), and contrasting that with the present-day treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories by Israelis. The comparison, though valid for supporting Dr Ghosheh's argument, suddenly struck me as being both painfully ironic and deeply tragic. It seemed as if the Arabs were always destined to weep over the loss of one paradise after another: first Andalusia, then Palestine! The Palestinian troupe, El-Karmal, from Haifa, had something similar in mind when they identified the two places metaphorically in their *La Farola* (The Lamp-post) and merged them into one image of paradise lost. The image cropped up again in two short dramatic pieces composed by Jose Monleon Bennacer (a poet and also the director and moving spirit of IITM) and directed by Francisco Ortuno. *Seefarad* (the Jewish name for Spain) and *Paradiso Roto* (The Ruined Paradise), presented the theme of paradise lost through Jewish and Arab eyes, with poems by El-Mutamid and the contemporary Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, among others, providing a more universal significance. Here Andalusia became not simply a place but an existential state and a symbol of human life and its deepest yearnings.

The French production carried us back to the 17th century to trace the rise and fall of the mythical Don Juan through the eyes of a bevy of convent girls; the Greek *Persians* transported us even further back to 480 BC and the palace of Xerxes to watch the destruction of a vast empire; *Caligula*, too, by the Egyptians, plunged us into an equally distant past to witness the ruins of a man and his reign. In the Moroccan production of Sa'dallah Wannus's *Elephant*, though time was left deliberately vague as in folk tales, the sense of a distant past was vividly evoked and once more the story was of ruin and decimation. However, in the Tunisian *Femtella* ("have you understood, or not") by the ever adventurous Tawfik Jibali, time was completely neutralised or, rather nullified; it was presented as a waste land, a dark silent hell, inhabited by six lost, tortured souls, imprisoned in frozen bodies dressed in modern garb. There was neither past nor present here however; only a dark void and a few sad traces of another ruined paradise.

After the show, the opening lines of Eliot's 'Burnt Norton' in the *Quartets*, ran through my head:

Time present and time past.

Are both perhaps present in time future.

And time future contained in time past.

If all time is eternally present

All time is unredeemable.

They seemed to sum up play the beautifully and elucidate, especially in the first three lines, what I had dimly felt all along to be the underlying philosphy of the festival. I doubt, however, that the founders of the IITM would go along with the last line. Nevertheless, one of the primary objectives of that independent international body (conceived in 1989 during the first session of the Motril festival, but officially founded and recognised in October 1991) is to promote closer ties among Mediterranean countries not only through visits, seminars, cultural exchanges, festivals and other similar activities, but also by searching into the past for common cultural roots. The topics of several of the seminars held by the institute over the past two years - in Madrid, Patras, Marseilles (where a French national branch of the IITM was set up by Michel Simonot), Syracuse, Rabat, Tunis and other places - testify to this overwhelming interest in the past.

The question of a shared Mediterranean identity in the theatre engaged the guest theatre critics in a two-session seminar, and though it was not resolved (and, perhaps, never can be since the definition of theatre itself proved quite controversial), the discussion yielded many a valuable insight and some very good suggestions for possible work in the future.

Besides the invitation for Arab directors to work with Spanish actors on Arabic texts (as in the case of the expatriate Iraqi director Jawad El-Assadi who is currently producing Sa'dallah Wannus's *The Head of the Memluk Jabir* in a Spanish translation for La Compania De Pendiente La Casola) or vice versa (as in an intended production of Lorca's *Yerma*, in Arabic with young Arab actors and a Spanish director), an interesting production-cum-research project was proposed. Actors and artists from different Mediterranean countries, north and south, should get together and work out a collective text and production. This would allow them to explore their common interests and shared attitudes and compare their emotional reactions and modes of

expression and communication. The experiment would also require the presence and cooperation of a theatre critic or scholar, and preferably also an anthropologist, a sociologist and a psychoanalyst for purposes of documentation, sifting and analysis.

Another proposed research project was the audio-visual recording of the personal and communal modes of self-expression in social life and transactions in all Mediterranean countries before they become eroded by the standardising influence of television, in particular from America.

Both projects would help actors and theatre artists immensely to understand their art and to discover new sources of inspiration. At the same time they would constitute a first step towards a real methodical investigation of the question of a Mediterranean identity. Unfortunately, however, both require vast financial resources and the IITM, as its director sadly confessed, is not a rich institution. A less costly and more realistic idea is a solidarity pact among Mediterranean theatre artists for the defence of freedom of expression and the protection of all artists from political, moral or intellectual coercion. Publications, too, are relatively inexpensive, and the guests and participants were presented by IITM with the first fruits of their work in that field – a Spanish translation of the Syrian Mohamed El-Maghoot's play *The Clown* and a collection of critical essays on Arab theatre by Arab critics.

However, the continuous harping on about Mediterranean themes became at times oppressive and somewhat claustrophobic, suggesting a narrow, bigoted regional view of culture. I was, therefore, extremely glad when a Mediterranean festival of Shakespeare's plays was proposed and accepted in principle in a working meeting of the heads and representatives of several Mediterranean theatre festivals, centres and educational institutes. Another meeting was scheduled for October to research the idea more thoroughly and the preparations for the festival are expected to take two or three years. (Egypt would probably take part in that festival through the Egyptian IITM branch planned by the Academy of Arts.)

The seminars were long and exhausting, sometimes lasting the whole day with only a short lunch-break. There were the plays, however, to look forward to in the evening and, more often than not, they proved rewarding. But more of that later.

Motril, Andalusia:
23rd Apr. 1992

The Wonderful Mr Terzopoulos

On the opening night we all looked jaded. No one apparently had had time to recover from the effects of the exhausting journey. Complaints buzzed around in the foyer of the Sala Coliseo Vinas: some (mostly journalists) were disgruntled by the shortage of information and the absence of any printed matter in either English or French (national pride in one's language was carried here a bit too far); others muttered in dismay, rather vaguely, about general negligence and the lack of organisation.

There was a grain of truth in most complaints. One must remember, though, that the Motril Festival and its sponsoring bodies, the International Institute of Mediterranean Theatre and its off-shoot, the Spanish-Arabic Theatre Foundation, are rich only in ideals and hopes, not in funds. They are still struggling to establish themselves and depend largely on voluntary work. Hopefully, things will improve in the future.

The Sala Coliseo Vinas, where the opening took place, was a bit of a disappointment. It was originally a cinema, which meant that if you sat in the front seats (typically hard and wooden) you could only see the actors from the knee upward, if they happened to be standing,

and from the neck upward if they sat down. Any floor action was naturally out of (or actually below) sight. It was very frustrating not to be able to see the stage floor and to have to stand up at intervals and crane one's neck until it ached only to be hissed at angrily by the people behind. Still, the show deserved it and I learnt my lesson.

On the following evening I watched from the gallery where the view was good and the seats cosily upholstered. Other people had the same idea, and by the third evening the stalls were practically empty. The theatre management took pity on the actors and we were forced to relinquish the comfort of the gallery. The place, we were promised in consolation, would soon be fully converted into a proper theatre and the stage restructured for better viewing. Good sound and lighting systems, however, were provided, which was a blessing. *Don Juan*, the play of the opening, could not have materialised in all its ravishing beauty without them.

Don Juan d'Origine, by the French Influence Fievet-Palies Company, was given in Spanish -- frustratingly, one might add, since a French version exists. Not that my French is really very good, but it is infinitely better than my Spanish. The story of the famous rake, however, is familiar enough and one had little trouble grasping the general drift of the scenes.

Louise Doutreligne, the first woman in literary history, I suppose, to venture into this masculine thematic domain, based her text on the first dramatic treatment of that mythical figure back in the 17th century. Like Tirso de Molina's *The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest*, her play falls into two parts, one dealing with the adventures and activities of the hero, another with his encounter with the marble statue and his subsequent descent into hell.

Unlike the dramatically prolific Spanish ecclesiastic, however, Doutreligne opts for a more light-hearted, whimsical, at times burlesque-oriented approach (despite the psychological profundity and subtlety), and chosses to view and project that archetypal symbol of virility through the eyes (erotic fantasies, repressed desires and hidden fears) of a bevy of college girls back in 1696. Hence the full title of the play: *Don Juan de Origen por las senoritas del colegio de Saint-Cyr en el ano 1696.*

At the head of that college for girls in Saint-Cyr back in 1696 was a certain Madame de Maintenon -- a real historical figure and one of the first believers in the educational value of theatre, or learning

through acting, as we now call it. She is reported to have practised what she preached, and, in the play, her figure corresponds, fascinatingly, with that of Tirso de Molina -- priest, playwright, champion of women and confessor to the grandest ladies of the kingdom. Was he not particularly good at drawing women at their wittiest and most intelligent?! And was not his favourite comic device women disguised as men?!

The figure of Vivaldi, too, is invoked, most impressively and significantly, in the musical framework of the play (designed by Christian Gaumy), and the image of the Ospedale della Pieta in Venice, where that *preto rosso* (or the red-haired priest, as Vivaldi was nicknamed) taught music and singing to female foundlings, floats up and merges with the image of the Maintenon educational institution, expanding its implications and imbuing it with a gentle spirit of benevolence. Here, art – be it music or theatre, religion, education, youth and femininity are reconciled and become the major force of inspiration behind the show.

The play opens with Madame Maintenon in an armchair, on a high bridge that presides over the scene, being read to. On the steps of the grand, semi-spiral staircase that leads down on the right, we see the girls in their frilly nightgowns and caps reading aloud to each other, by candlelight, the story of Don Juan. As the book changes hands and the recital flows from voice to voice at a rising tempo, they begin to change their clothes and dress up right in front of our eyes in preparation for a performance, half-mocking, half-serious, of the original Spanish text.

In the next scene, one of them struts onto the stage in hose and doublet and stuffed breeches (all red), posing as Don Juan and is soon joined by another, in an identical get-up, also masquerading as the trickster of Seville. It was like seeing double! The rest of the parts were all played by nine actresses, many of them doubling and trebling and sometimes assuming as many as five characters in succession.

These mercurial transformations suggested something of the ambience of dreams where, as Strindberg once noted, "characters split, double, multiply, dissolve, condense, float apart, coalesce, " and the exuberance of the total design and the energy of the acting were at once dizzying and exhilarating.

This was not simply a theatre-in-the-theatre type of performance in the manner of Pirandello, or a theatrical *tour de force* for an all-female cast (and what a cast!). It was 'pure', genuine theatre -- fascinating, absorbing, magical and quite unpretentious. Poetic too, in a sophisticatedly naive kind of way, and elusively pensive, despite the eroticism and broad humour. It inspired in me a feeling of nostalgia for *je ne sais quoi* -- for that long-lost freshness of vision, perhaps, that only children know? Or that sense of wonder, consonant with innocence, that Wordsworth went on about? It may sound ridiculous, but that evening I felt like a child visiting a fairground for the first time and being totally engrossed by its sounds and sights and could almost hear the tunes of a magical barrel organ rising above Vivaldi's heavenly music.

Alain Gaucher's exquisite costumes, with their rich, soft fabrics and warm, vigorous colours, and his bold stage set partook of the same spirit of revelry and broad, open theatricality. On the right, a huge, fan-shaped, wooden staircase spirals up to and connects with a sloping bridge that rises gently upwards then dips abruptly and sharply down in a straight line, suggesting a high mountain ridge or a promontory. At the back of this massive high wall, however, another spiral staircase sweeps down in a deep curve to meet the front staircase, forming a deep alcove under the bridge which served many purposes. When a trap-door in its left wall flopped down to act as a shelf, a table, a bed or a pyre, it was no longer simply a porticoed passage, a cave or an alleyway, but assumed the multiple identity of home, grave and tavern; and when the smoke billowed through it and engulfed Don Juan, it was, naturally, the pit of hell.

The imaginative versatility of Gaucher's set, together with Francois Austerlitz's inspired lighting plan, enabled director Jean-Luc Palies to produce a fast-flowing production -- almost Shakespearean in its cinematic fluidity, to transform the stage into a microcosm of the world, of the great globe itself. Prospero-like, he created, out of airy nothingness, insubstantial visions of cloud-capped towers, gorgeous palaces, solemn temples, of mountains, shipwrecks, stormy seas and the shores of Tarragona. And all without props, except a chair, a coffin, a toy ship, a couple of balloons and some candles.

Thanks to the stage and lighting design too, Palies was able to produce some stunning movement configurations and unforgettable

scenic effects, and to transform them into highly-charged metaphors of the human condition. Unforgettable too, in that production, was the Claudine Fievet and Leonor Galindo-Frot joint performance of the red-clad Don Juan.

At the end of the performance, we all felt elated. The jaded look had been washed away by the magic of art. The women, in particular, were beaming and I, personally, must have looked like a cat who had just been fed a fat dollop of cream. Aesthetic pleasure apart, I was immensely tickled by the idea of women playing Don Juan. For centuries men had banned women from the stage, if not the theatre altogether, and had appropriated their parts, identities and voices. What better justice than to give them Don Juan, no less, as a woman in drag!

I thought I had seen the best of the festival and seriously considered missing Aeschylus's *Persians* (which I had always disliked in reading) the following day. What a tragic loss that would have been! Director Theodoros Terzopoulos and his Attis Theatre troupe worked what amounts to a miracle, transforming a dramatically limp, oppressively elegiac and predominantly choral work into a ritualistic, almost orgasmic and orgiastic celebration of sorrow.

The stage was empty except for the black drapes which framed it. A large white circle on the floor enclosed the five actors (three women and two men) and their few props: five twin foot-pedestals with straps, suggesting the old Greek cothurnus, or high boot; a sheet of golden cloth and a box containing some photographs (hardly visible at the beginning) and some thick brass hand cymbals (or that is what they looked like from my place in the gallery).

The costumes were uniformly black and deliberately primitive in design, with a hint of savagery. The arms and shoulders of the women and the upper torso of the men were expressively and rather pathetically bare.

When the lights go up, we see the actors ranged round the white circle and the initial chorus of the Persian elders is delivered in a finely orchestrated manner in alternate solos and choral patches. And when Evriklia Sofroniadou advances to the centre of the circle to assume the character of the queen mother Atossa, the other characters begin, in turn, to individualise themselves in different capacities as messenger, ghost of Darius or the defeated King Xerxes.

In this kind of production, however, the plot becomes of marginal importance. It does not really matter whether you know the play or not. For what the play seeks to represent and embody is the experience of loss, in all its extravagant passion, the sense of collapse in all its desperate abandon, and sorrow – pure, distilled sorrow after the body melts in the hell of existential experience.

All the primitive rituals and gestures of sorrow, particularly in the Mediterranean and East, are harnessed here, condensed and symphonically orchestrated: the breast beating, the hair-tearing, the writhing and heaping of dust on the head the eerie wailing and tortured animal cries, the unearthly stillness of the huddled forms in complete surrender, and the self-beating, slapping and torture.

It was all there, but purified, distilled to its very essence and stylised into magnificently eloquent rhythmical vocal and physical patterns. I do not think I shall ever forget that funeral choric-ritualistic dance performed by Atossa to the accompaniment of the chorus, the final writhing dance of death on the floor, culminating in the hoarse defiant wordless song of affirmation, or the sight of Atossa, slowly scattering the family photographs to the four winds, to the rhythmical sound of lamentations, and finally holding up two horribly vacant negatives, or her mouth, framed in a magnifying glass, in a silent scream and looking like a dark fathomless hole while her bare arms stretched out helplessly like the broken wings of a bird. She was the spitting image of the familiar mask of tragedy and the living throbbing embodiment of its indomitable grandeur, relentless dignity and infernal agony.

We were all spell-bound, and for the first time I understood, physically understood, what Aristotle had meant by the word catharsis. The actors earned themselves five curtain calls and critic Hassan Attiya, who is currently studying in Spain and working with IITM, took us, Professor Samir Ahmed, the dean of the Egyptian Theatre Institute and myself, backstage to meet the wonderful Mr Terzopoulos. Dr Ahmed invited him to teach a Greek drama course at the Academy of Arts and promised to arrange a three-day visit for the troupe to perform *The Persians* at the Roman amphitheatre in Alexandria (the production was originally designed to be performed in the open air). The troupe, Mr Terzopoulos told us, were particularly keen on performing in the land of the Nile.

Next at the Sala Coliseo Vinas was Sa'dallah Wannus's (obviously rampant) *Elephant*. I seem to bump into it at every Arab theatre festival; and after three or four times I got reconciled to its inscrutable ubiquity. But I never imagined it would chase me into Spain and out-of-the-way Motril! But it was there sure enough; made the crossing from Morocco with director Fawzi Ben Saidi and the Masrah El-Madina troupe, then proceeded after the festival to storm the theatres of Malaga.

I do not think I have seen as many productions of one play, including Shakespeare, as I have seen of this one and it puzzles me. I suppose the presentation of the symbolic elephant on the stage poses an irresistible challenge to the imagination of many directors. Mr Ben Saidi has proved the most original so far; his elephant was a graceful, handsome, athletic young man in a black leotard and on roller-skates! He was the epitome of health, wealth and power, and looked like a modified version of the American Superman.

The image of the American champion stereotype, coupled with the faded, lavender-smelling image of a veiled lady in white lace pushing a frilled pram, and the image of a rugged lance-bearer, faintly suggestive of a Roman warrior fallen on hard times, all combined to create an initial sense of excitement. The set, too, was interesting: it had a grim look of solidity about it and suggested a sense of menace. Eventually, it seemed to take on a life of its own, to split and combine into new shapes and maze-like formations, and to chase the characters and corner them into little cells in the palace sequence.

In contrast to the American-looking 'elephant', the king's pet and guardian, the royal chamber had a pronounced Eastern look. The message was obvious: the rulers in the East and the Third World sell their countries to the West in exchange for protection, wealth and autocratic power. Too simplistic, perhaps?! But even if you swallow the message, the production still does not work. The initial visual sequence was all right as far as it went, which was not very far. The trouble was that as soon as the play proper began and the actors started voicing their lines, there was a sudden drop, a definite split and one could not, however hard one tried, reconcile the verbal and the visual sides of the performance.

On Friday, the Music of the Nile Group (affiliated to the Opera House, I am told) gave us a lovely concert of traditional oriental music and our last evening at the Sala Coliseo Vinas witnessed a performance of *Caligula* by the Academy of Arts recently established

company. I described the production earlier in this diary and voiced many reservations. They still hold after my third viewing of the play. Strangely enough, however, the performance I saw in Motril was infinitely better than the ones I saw in Cairo. Nour El-Sherif was a bit shaky and tense in the first part, but, in the second, he seemed to relax and gave a riveting performance. The general verdict was that it was an uneven production with brilliant spots and many dull uninspired stretches.

At our other theatrical space, the Casa de la Palma, a small chamber theatre in a charming Hispano-Arab kind of building, with open courts, fountains and palm trees (which serves as the headquarters of the Spanish-Arab theatre foundation and the festival's base) we enjoyed flamenco music with guitarist Manuel Carvajal and his troupe and Moroccan music with Mohammed Moutawakil. There we also met Tawfiq Gibali, his magnificent troupe, his fictional hollow men and women and his theatrical conundrum *Femtella*? (Have you understood or not?).

The floor-level, box-like stage on one end of the long hall was draped in dark blue. On the left, two tattered wooden armchairs stood, looking old and weary with the paint peeling off in many places. On the other side, nothing was visible except an ossified, ancient, almost antediluvian stump of a tree and a few stones. The scene was redolent with the smell of death and the memories of some horrific catastrophe. It breathed a sense of utter desolation.

When the lights dimmed, we glimpsed in a cold, faded, bluish haze, shadows floating in. When the lights came up, we discovered what looked like an old family photograph with six people. The picture was neither nice nor cosy, but disturbing and rather weird. The still figures gazed at us, unblinking, for a full five minutes, or maybe ten. As the minutes ticked by, we grew nervous and uncomfortable. Was this some sort of silly obnoxious joke, some whispered. Others giggled. When the staring eyes began to redden and well up with tears which flowed silently and mingled with the rich saliva dribbling from the mouths, a wave of nausea swept over me.

For those who stood it till the end (for many left and the creaking of the door, opening and shutting, was intermittently heard), it was hypnotic. In succession, the characters, who seemed eternally rooted

to their places, went through repetitive vocal and physical sequences of attempts at communication and self-expression. The attempts yielded nothing but frustration. They finally explode, inwardly, and instead of the transparent, glistening saliva, blood wells out of their mouths and trickles down their clothes.

Provocative, disgusting, technically stunning and nightmarish as it was, *Femtella* fell with many. There was something vaguely pretentious about it and a kind of *déjà vu* feeling. It has all been done before, by Beckett, Artaud and others of their clan. It was also painfully sadistic as far as the actors were concerned, not to mention the audience. Nevertheless, it was a performance that one could not forget however hard one tried and whether one praised it or damned it.

In the same hall we watched the Palestinian *Farola* (Lamp-post) by the Karmal troupe from Haifa. A pungent, agit-prop, one-man show, in the style of the *hakawati*, it unfolds through a series of recollections, recreated in the present by the actor and centering on the theme of alienation. Funny, sensitive, and raw, Antoin Shleht's text served as an excellent vehicle for the versatile talent of Akram Khuri.

The symbolic interplay of shadow and light, of illusion and reality, of past and present, were visually rendered by Director Selim El-Daw and his assistant Osama Masri in terms of an extremely simple and evocative stage set which consisted of a white screen on one side, which shows a gigantically magnified shadow of the wandering Palestinian, and a broken lamp-post leaning on the wreck of a smashed car. Every object on the stage, and they were few enough, had a dramatic function or a symbolic value, and more often than not, both. The real merit of the show, however, was its ability to reconstruct for us, and recreate for all the alienated Palestinians, whether inside or in the diaspora, something of the feel of an old, but still very raw, wound.

The image of a paradise lost haunted the Palestinian *La Farola*. Two days later, the festival was over, and I went on a pilgrimage to Granada, Seville and Cordoba, in search of an older paradise.

The National Upstairs:
30th Apr. 1992

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

When ten years ago, my sister Sanaa, then in her early twenties, announced to me that she was translating Edna O'Brien's recently published *Virginia* into Arabic, I thought she was joking. Not only is the text devilishly difficult to translate, with its stream-of-consciousness vague modalities, fluid syntax, subtle shifts and intricate, variegated rhythms and tonalities, but its subject matter too is extremely sensitive and thorny. It belongs to an area of human feeling and experience which people, in our part of the world, prefer to ignore and leave untouched: namely lesbianism and the androgynous potential of female identity.

She would sweat over the play, I told her, and expend a lot of creative energy, only to be rewarded with silent disapproval, at best, or loud, censorious castigation. Besides, I added, no one would ever dare put it on the stage.

Time was to prove me wrong. Last week a young woman by the name of Iffat Yahya rang me up to invite me to a production at the National Theatre of that same translation which Sanaa dauntlessly undertook and published in the Theatre Magazine in August 1982. I was thrilled. Here was another young female director, with her own self-

funding troupe, the Friends of the National Theatre, a new and valuable addition to the Free Theatre Movement; and, what is more, like Sanaa, she was not afraid of Virginia Woolf.

Ms Yahya studied theatre and psychology at the American University in Cairo (AUC), which explains, perhaps, her attraction to O'Brien's difficult psychological text. For a period, too, she worked closely with the Scottish director Ross Illions at the AUC, assisting at such productions as *Summer and Smoke* (another daring psychological play), *Thank You Dr Sterling* and *Born Yesterday,* among others. In recognition of her talent and as a gesture of appreciation for the work she has done, Mr Illions has contributed substantially to the funding of her present production which she, on her part, has dedicated to him.

Of her talent and technical expertise, there was plenty of evidence here.The simple abstract set (with a black gauze partition at the back framing a small white screen on which various shots of Bloomsbury, London and the country were projected) was fittingly sombre and subdued without being oppressive. Here, Ms Yahya was well-advised in letting herself be guided by O'Brien's stage directions. The uniformly white lighting, too, was austere and deeply evocative. It established a sensitive interplay of light and shadow, tenderness and boldness, softness and garishness, which corresponded deftly and unobstrusively with the subtle transitions of tone and mood and helped to underline the intensity and emotional volatility of the central character.

Some cuts in the original text, however, were inevitable and they weakened its general impact and reduced our sense of the complexity of Mrs Woolf's relationship with her husband, and with her friend Vita Sackville-West. The play too, unlike the published translation, was given in colloquial Arabic, rather unwisely, in my view. It brought it uncomfortably close to Egyptian daily life with its deeply entrenched prejudices and taboos. Some members of the audience looked embarrassed, whilst others could not suppress their giggles.

The major weakness of the production, however, and its most damaging aspect, was the acting. One can understand and sympathise with Ms Yahya's dilemma. Good actors, right now, are in very short supply even in the professional theatre and the play she chose requires actors of exceptional talent and virtuosity. One must remember that in the play's première at the Stratford Festival, Ontario, in June 1980, it was the magnificent Maggie Smith who undertook the title role.

After casting about for a suitable actress, without success, Ms Yahya found herself in the unfortunate position of having to play Vir-

ginia herself. Physically, she is unsuited to the part -- too soft and fluffy -- and her voice and performance failed to compensate. She brought out the character's vulnerability, helpless bewilderment and genuine warmth; but there was nothing of Virginia's catty side, her acrid humour, toughness of mind and rugged emotions.

Heidi Abdel-Ghani, an attractive art student in her acting debut, played Vita. She looked suitably aggressively sexy and flamboyant and her sensuality contrasted well with Virginia's etherealness. She was too young and inexperienced, however, to understand fully the character she was grappling with. As for Tariq Sa'id (a talented director in his own right) who doubled as father and husband, he skated blithely through both parts without seeming to understand or care for either.

With a better cast, or if more work is done with the present one, the production could be salvaged, as I hope it will when it is given a second run at the Avant-garde theatre.

Theatre Therapy

I admit I am a coward. I cannot bear to dwell for long on the facts of sickness or physical disability -- those horrible dirty tricks that nature, or chance, chooses sometimes to play on people. When they touch children, the thought becomes simply too harrowing. I feel in mortal danger of losing faith in life.

It was, therefore, with great trepidation that I ventured into the major hall of the Theatre Institute at the Academy of Arts last week to witness Abdel-Hakim El-Tahir's experiment at producing *Cinderella* for the children of the Amal primary school for the deaf and dumb. It was part of his postgraduate work. But why should a Sudanese theatre student and promising director opt for such a difficult and painful project?

"I thought of everything I had seen and read," he said, "and suddenly felt a deep revulsion for all trends, schools and theories." He wanted to do something fresh, genuine, authentic, he went on to say - something that would prove to him, in the work, beyond a shadow of doubt, the moral validity and existential viability of theatre. If theatre is to survive and hold its own against the insidious encroachments and inroads of cinema, video and television, he explained, it has to prove

its indispensability as a communal activity knitted vitally into the fabric of society and as an essential form of self-expression and exploration, and a venue for interaction and communication.

It all sounded so noble and impressive that, inevitably, my inveterate cynicism reared up its head. Was he simply capitalising on the infirmities of young children? The thought buzzed in my head. Theatre therapy for the disabled young, I had read, usually took place in the privacy of the school. Was there not something indecent in exposing disabled children to the lachrymose gaze and sentimental gushings of a comfortable and healthy audience?

The audience in this case, however, were the families of the children, their teachers and a few sympathetic visitors and academics. As one mother riveted her eyes rapturously on her son strutting blithely on the stage as the prince's guard, and another melted into tears at the sight of her daughter in a gorgeous pink dress impersonating Cinderella, and as several others forgot themselves and all the rules of theatrical decorum and let their voices rip through the hall in long, melodious shrills of joy *(zaghareet),* their pain and sorrow, the burning heartache of years seemed to melt into a glow of joy.

I was no longer watching a performance at a safe aesthetic distance and could not afford the luxury of the detached, niggling professional critic. I was participating in a celebration, a kind of ritualistic initiation ceremony. Stage and auditorium were bound together in a spirit of sympathy and human solidarity. The slovenly whims and vicious slips and oversights of Mother Nature had not carried the day after all. Human care, in the form of theatre, had triumphed.

What a pity the little actors could not hear the frenzied clapping, the resounding applause. But they sensed the joy, the sense of victory over death, silence and disease.

Sturm und Drang

If the people in the government had seen *Suq El-Kalaam* (The Word Market) in Ismailia on 7 May, I do not think they would have been able to sleep peacefully afterwards. However hardened their conscience or benighted their consciousness, they could not have failed to be shocked by the bleakness of its message or its pent-up fury. They would have been forced to admit that the present policies (or lack of them) towards youth are leading the country to the brink of disaster. It is inconceivable, if not actually criminal, that two generations should be arbitrarily condemned to life-long celibacy and unemployment, and left a prey to the ravages of despair. Denied the hope of housing, love and self-respect, and shorn of all dreams, should we wonder that they turn to crime and drugs or become bearded terrorists and zealous fanatical bigots?

In a series of short brisk scenes, the young artists of the Badrasheen Theatre Club draw a grotesque, nightmarish picture of their generation's life in present-day Egypt. A blind man crosses the street only to fall down an open manhole - an obvious symbol; another, on his way to buy the traditional breakfast of *Fuul* (black baked beans) holding a tin saucepan, is suddenly assailed by three famished cavemen who look like savage cannibals; two friends at a cafe, reading the

morning papers, suddenly begin to literally eat them out of rage; a number of young men, squatting on the road-side like beggars with a sign saying "out of work" pinned to the back of each, begin to solicit the sexual favours of a customer who struts across the stage twirling a gold chain; another group sit in a circle, smoking hash and looking hungrily at the swinging hips of a man absurdly and hideously disguised as a woman. Other images of sexual frustration and distortion, of impotence, violence and frenzy flash before our eyes in silence (except for some groans, grunts, screams and snatches of vulgar songs); and as the absence of words (except for a recurrent curse) gradually becomes menacing and oppressive, it begins to speak eloquently of another malaise and another kind of impotence.

At this stage, one of the actors walks in carrying a speaker's stand and an auctioneer's bell; in contrast with the eerie muteness of the earlier scenes, the stage now fills with words. Having stated the problem in almost purely visual terms, *Suq El-Kalaam* sets about discrediting the solutions proposed by the three major ideologies in Egypt now, those of liberalism, socialism - the left and the right - and, of course, religious fundamentalism.

Their exponents are trotted out and parodied: the frenzied, bespectacled Marxist; the urbane, soft, well-fed and mealy-mouthed liberal; and the long-bearded, white-robed, swaying preacher with a paper turban sporting "Islam is the solution". They take the stand in turn to spout out their hackneyed jargon and empty slogans, drenching the stage in a veritable torrent of words, words, words! The auctioneer stands aside and at the end of each speech rings his bell to start the bidding, for what is on sale here are ideologies. But who would buy such rot? As the audience, who become part of the game here, reject the speakers one by one, they - the speakers - are carted off the stage and dumped in the wings. The final image is of a lonely young man in a dark empty space being pulled from side to side by invisible forces, as in a tug-of-war, and shouting in agony: "What is the solution?" As it rang out in the silence, the terrible ordeal of this generation - their wasted youth and energy, vain hopes and dreams, their crushing sense of alienation and total loss of faith - struck me with the full force of an electric shock.

The young amateur artists I saw at this festival, and others like them in the 30 theatre clubs scattered all over the country, are luckier than most. They have found the means to vent their anger constructively and channel their tremendous energies creatively into art. But what about the rest? Can theatre clubs, however numerous, by

themselves suffice as effective safety-valves? Is it not about time we started trying to answer their urgent appeal, their raw and desolate angry cry: "What is the solution?"

Suq El-Kalaam (written and directed by Hamdi El-Gazzar, a very young man himself) was not the only play in the festival to expose the predicament of youth in Egypt nowadays. However, it was the most ruthless and candid. A sense of crisis was felt in all the plays, but to different degrees of intensity; and more often than not, the predicament of youth was viewed and projected as part of the predicament of a whole society or a whole nation.

Some Like it Cold

Suq El-Kalaam (The Word Market), which I saw last week at the 2nd Theatre Clubs festival in Ismailia, was not a 'nice' play in the tame bourgeois tradition. Its ruthless self-baring and uncompromising honesty enraged many. It was to be expected; after all, 'mankind', as Eliot once said, 'cannot bear too much reality.' Like Youssef Chahine's candid documentary *Cairo as Illuminated by its People*, the play came in for a lot of heavy shelling. In the case of the three-member jury, it proved absolutely too much and unforgivably beyond the pale.

Not only did they leave it prizeless, but they included in their final report a thinly disguised barbed admonition to the players. In one paragraph they complain sourly of some young artists who mistake experimentation for indecency and carry it to the limits of 'sadism'. They set out deliberately, the report went on to say, to 'shock, offend, torture and nauseate the audience.' The drift of the argument was that unless such renegades and reprobates repented and toed the line, they could never hope to win any prizes. As I listened in disbelief, I wondered how Artaud or Julian Beck, or a host of other thrilling theatre 'sadists' would have reacted to such drivel, and for the first time re-

gretted bitterly turning down the festival's invitation to sit on the panel of judges.

This is not to say that the award-winning productions were bad or undeserving. Far form it. They all spoke the truth and were, indeed, in some cases, bitter bills to swallow. In each case, however, the pill was carefully coated with layers of sugar. Of music, singing and dancing, there was plenty. These, together with the occasional sprinkling of optimism, outbursts of spirited gaiety, or doses of facile wishful thinking, not to mention the happy ending, were, in a measure, evasive tactics calculated to dilute the grimness of the message intended by those plays and to soften the blow.

The first-prize winner, *El-Bataheesh ("Small Fry")* from Port Said used the frisky tunes and frothy popular airs of the local 'Simsimiyah' musical tradition to drench its painful picture of the city's deterioration in a romantic, twilight haze of nostalgia that softened its sordidness. The effect was gently melancholic rather than abrasive.

Bab El-Mazarr ("The Gate of the Shrine"), from Beni Mazar, near Menia, which came second, relied heavily for disguise on local folklore, cults and rituals, and took refuge in vagueness as well as in God. Like *Suq El-Kalaam,* the play centres on a quest for deliverance, but the quest here takes a metaphysical direction. An alienated, disillusioned young man, in a vague state of *angst*, has a vision in his sleep and consequently sets off on a pilgrimage accompanied by his long-suffering mother. His destination is Bahnasa, an archaeological site near Minia, rich in Pharaonic, Christian and Islamic monuments. The place enjoys, both in reality and the play, a certain holiness among the locals and is regarded as sacred ground. To this day, people in nearby towns and villages perform weekly pilgrimages on Friday to plead for health, wealth and offspring.

The pilgrim's progress takes the form of successive visits to the tombs and shrines of martyrs and holy people, and at each station the play plunges into a riotous, colourful display, with song and music, of the folk rituals and ancient practices connected with the place. The pilgrimage ends at Sidi El-Dakrouri's shrine, where an annual fair is held, and where the hero's *angst* and skepticism melt in the heated feverishly of the ritualistic Zikr. He stands in the middle of a semi-circle of festival swaying worshippers and reveals to the world the secret

panacea: unload all your troubles unto God and you are delivered. It was vexing, of course, not to know the precise nature of these troubles the young man threatened to unload onto the Dear Lord, and whether they could not be solved by human intervention.

From the beginning, the play seemed intent on eschewing all the social, economic or political underpinnings of the initial situation, and appeared to move in a vacuum. More damaging still was its definite lack of point of view; it could never make up its mind whether to endorse or condemn the rituals it celebrated and kept disturbingly oscillating between the two extremes. This gave rise to a lot of controversy.

In the discussion that followed the performance the issue was hotly disputed. Some bearded members of the audience were loud and vociferous in their condemnation of what they called the play's heretical tendencies and its condoning of pagan practices and rituals by Islam. Some left-wing critics, on the other hand, found the play's fatalistic spirit most objectionable, and were deeply dismayed by its escapist, passive end, and its general tendency to divorce human suffering from social reality and historical causes. The real problem with the play, however, and ideological cavilling apart, is that technically and artistically it does not qualify as a play at all. The folkloric material, collectively gathered, researched and collated by the Beni Mazar Theatre Club members, needed a seasoned playwright to give it shape and point. Instead, the members collectively wrote the script using the quest theme as a thin, bland thread on which to string their exotic findings. The result was not a play, but an episodic, folkloric hybrid which some have described, not unjustly, as 'touristy'.

The Shebeen El-Kom Theatre Club's *Variations on a Sad Arab Theme,* which came third, was also episodic, but there was method in its apparent fragmentation. From poems by Abdul-Rahman El-Sharqawi, Salah Abdul-Saboor, Nizarr Qabbani, Ahmed Fouad Nigm and Izz El-Din Ismail, director Tal'at El-Dimirdash constructed an intelligent, multi-tonal collage in which choral chanting alternated with narration, declamation and farcical as well as Brechtian representation. The theme was the loss of the motherland and it was played in two major variations; one centred on the phenomenon of the Egyptian peasants' desertion of their land and emigration to other Arab countries in search of easy money and fast fortunes; the other centred

on Palestine and the Arabs' desertion of its cause. The two variations were played sometimes separately, in alternation, or, simultaneously, in counterpoint, and occasionally they merged into each other in perfect unison. Mr El-Dimirdash's well-trained and disciplined actors more than did justice to his intricate collage and acquitted themselves with energy and finesse. The only thing that marred the show, perhaps, was its facilely optimistic end which showed the Israeli vulture (the symbol of Israel in the play) framed in a huge Star of David and being trampled underfoot by the collective force of the Arabs, spear-headed by a Palestinian child. It somehow struck a false, sentimental note which rang hollow and seemed like a parody of a familiar cliché.

The rest of the contesting productions deserve only a brief mention. They were generally of indifferent artistic merit and little imaginative daring, with only a few interesting details here and there. There were two modest one-act plays by Alfred Farag, *The Trap* and *The Straw Circle* (the former receiving two productions by two different theatre clubs); there was also Tawfiq El-Hakim's *The Angels' Prayer*; the Syrian Mamdouh Udwan's *The Arrest of Mr Zareef; A Tale from the Valley of Salt,* set in Pharaonic times, by Mohamed Mahran El-Sayed; a translation of Slavomir Mrozek's *Striptease*. In all of these, political coercion, economic exploitation and social corruption are recurrent themes, and the heroes in each case feel helpless, trapped and alienated.

Directress Abeer Ali's *Egyptian Ghosts,* which I much admired when I saw it at the second Free Theatre Festival, was marred on this occasion by the absence of the leading actress for exam reasons. A young male member of the group undertook the part with disastrous results. He looked every inch a man and lacked the versatility and improvisational powers essential to the part. The stage, too, if we can call it that, was too cramped to accommodate comfortably the many folkloric motifs that make up the set, and too close to allow a good view of the stylized rituals performed by the actors.

The final show on the last night of the festival was outside the competition; but had it been in, it would have carried off all the prizes without question. *The Right of Emotional Asylum* was another poetic collage. Out of the poetry of Azza Badr and some of her bitterly humourous journalistic articles about everyday frustrations and her adventures with a bus, Mohamed El-Sherbeeni wove a sensitive, haunt-

ing, extremely moving and hilariously funny play for one woman. Once more, the predicament of youth in Egypt nowadays is painfully exposed, but this time through feminine eyes. Ahmed Sukarno directed smoothly, suavely, imaginatively and most unobtrusively. His lighting, movement and choice of incidental music infused into the production a magical poetic energy and transformed the completely empty stage (except for a row of three chairs at the back) into a richly evocative place, suggesting in alternation a busy Cairo street at high noon, a bus stop, the inside of a crowded bus, a flat in a modest noisy area and the barren landscapes of the young woman's frustrated longings and tortured mind.

Looking round me at the audience before the show - at that many-headed monster which tends to grow more heads in the provinces and become more noisy, garrulous, restless and irrepressible - I got cold feet. I feared for little Maysa El-Rifa'i who is used to the sheltered halls of the AUC Theatre Department and its refined audience. Acting at the Avant-garde theatre in Khalid Galal's *The Striped Ones* during the Free Theatre Festival could be regarded in her case as a kind of slumming compared to the AUC. And now the provinces! Would she be able to cope?!

The lights went up and she was there, with her dainty small figure, sensitive face, upright, dignified posture and charismatic presence. Gradually, the noise - the fidgeting and scraping of chairs, the loud whispers, the yelling of babies and the screaming of children - subsided, and within five minutes she had the monster eating out of her hand. It was as if she had cast a spell upon the hall; you could almost hear a pin drop - such was the mesmerised silence. They hung on her every word and followed her every move, and she knew it and proceeded to charm them even further, acting as she had never acted before. She gave a stunning, masterful performance worthy of the most veteran of actresses, and her vocal range and its rich, warm timbre as well as her immaculate Arabic enunciation could put to shame many professionals.

The quartet Azza Badr, Mohamed El-Sherbeeni, Ahmed Sukarno and Maysa El-Rifa'i have produced between them a perfect little gem. It was the best conclusion to the festival and redeemed its many faults and failures.

Two in a Pigsty

African plays are something of a rare phenomenon on the Egyptian stage. Apart from a students' production of *Sizwe Bensi Is Dead* by South African playwright Athol Fugard and a couple of short pieces by the Nigerian Wole Soyinka (also done by students at the Theatre Institute as graduation projects) I have failed to track down any. This omission strikes me as both serious and puzzling. After all, Egypt is part of Africa; and when one considers the overtly political nature of most African drama and our own natural predilection for political satire, this near total neglect of our neighbours' crops must strike one as somewhat odd and wayward.

It was therefore with great pleasure that I received an invitation to see a production of Fugard's *A Place with the Pigs* in Alexandria. The text may be unsuited to the festive spirit of the fasting season and its sombreness could prove a little too heavy on the stomach after the usually rich 'breakfast' meals, but then, most of the light-entertainment shows scheduled for Ramadan have not yet materialized in their final form. Well into the second week of the holy month, I found them still in rehearsal!

I arrived at El-Shatbi cultural centre with great expectations; Fugard's text, which I know and love well, is a challenge to any director and holds immense possibilities for the actors. Its intricate shifts of

tone and mood and subtle mixture of pathos and humour, of passion, poetry and farce would delight the heart of any member of the Thespian tribe.

Here, an intense psychological drama of fear, guilt and hope is played out in the farcical setting of a pigsty in some unspecified Marxist country (though the names of the characters and other verbal clues clearly indicate Russia). It opens on Victory Day, ten years after the end of the Second World War, and a war memorial, carrying the martyrs names, is about to be unveiled in the village square. Pavel's name would be among them; but Pavel was never martyred. Instead, he deserted from the army and ran away home to hide in his own pigsty. He faces the firing squad if he dares go out.

In the first scene, or, rather, movement, Fugard unveils the spiritual and mental torment and the bestial physical degradation Pavel has undergone during his ten years of hiding. But does Pavel really want to be free? Can he really survive in the world outside? More importantly, does the world outside - the world of "Comrade Secretary Chomski" and his highfalutin slogans - hold any real promise of freedom? These are the basic questions that surface in the first movement, almost imperceptibly, through many funny incidents and the pathetic, hilarious wrestling of Pavel and his wife against their situation.

The following three movements drive the couple relentlessly downward, deeper into the Stygian murkiness of the sty in search of answers. Violence and despair alternate with moments of ecstasy and flights of true lyricism, and in all this the comic side to the situation is never sacrificed. Indeed, throughout, we are kept sliding giddily from the sublime to the ridiculous and vice versa and it works beautifully.

By drawing on Greek and Christian mythology too, Fugard creates many a delightful irony which help to clarify the couple's, and especially Pavel's, dilemma. At many points, for example, Pavel compares himself explicitly to Adam and his sty to hell; but the two comparisons work ironically since the world outside is not exactly the garden of Eden, nor is his wife exactly the archetypal Eve. The figure of Ajax is also implicitly invoked to provide ironical comment. In one scene, Pavel, in a fit of frenzied despair, rushes at the pigs, thrashing them mercilessly and ends up slaughtering one. Pavel, however, unlike Ajax who did a similar deed, slaughtering the sheep of the Greek army, fancying they were his enemies, does not take his own life. In-

stead, he gets a good beating at the hands of his wife and snaps out of his mood.

What saves Pavel and his wife finally is not a quixotic act like Ajax's; for the play is ultimately a vehement political denunciation, however disguised, of all bourgeois values and patriarchal systems. Pavel gains his freedom when he rids himself of his sentimental veneration of the former and crippling fear of the latter. Rather than kill the pigs, he chases them out, relinquishing his only source of income, his one and only security, just as he had relinquished earlier his fanciful childhood memories and the pretty red slippers which 'dear old Mama made for her darling little Pavel'. It is only then, on the brink of ruin and shorn of all protective shields and illusions, that the couple can feel free, can sing, laugh and cry and experience holiness in a pigsty.

In the hands of another director, I would have feared grievously for this beautiful text. But I had seen other productions by Mahmoud Abu Doma and his group and knew how well they relished grappling with difficult texts and how competently they invariably rose to their challenge.

A playwright himself, Abu Doma understands all about the integrity of texts. When he directs other people's work he is careful not to mess about with it. A scrupulous in-depth exploration of the text and its different levels, good, robust acting, a simple, functional, uncluttered set and an avoidance of all frills and fripperies seem to be his working principles, and so far they have served him well. His own *Castaways* which he directed at the garden of the Alexandria *Atelier* and his *Dance of the Scorpions*, performed at the open air theatre of the Opera House, as well as his production of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* at El-Shatbi cultural centre were all triumphs.

In the present production, the same principles were at work. Nehad Nusair provided an adequate straw-strewn set with suitably oppressive grey stone walls, a shabby stool and a grey metal pail.The only thing that marred the set was a drawing representing a couple of bird's wings. A rather childish representation of the longing for freedom. The acting was vibrant and

Forceful, if a little too passionate sometimes. Indeed, actress Awatef Ibrahim got carried away in the beating scene the night I was

there and ended up giving Ayman El-Khashab, as Pavel, a deep cut on the side of his face. Awatif too, intentionally or otherwise, seemed to slide over many of the in-built comic cues and effects. She took herself too seriously sometimes and that was a mistake. On the whole, however, she acquitted herself well in a difficult, demanding part.

Ayman El-Khashab did even better. He strove hard to bring out the comic and ironical undertones of the play, and succeeded, not a mean feat in the face of Ms Ibrahim's headlong enthusiasm. Director Abu Doma did not spare him either and kept him moving restlessly all the time when he was not rushing, falling about, thrashing the pigs or being thrashed.

A little less physical and emotional agitation and more humour would make this already very good show into an excellent one.

Mohamed Farid Theatre :
13th Aug. 1992

Ten Candles for ESTA

ESTA (Egyptian Society of Theatre Amateurs) was born ten years ago at the hands of the 'lunatics'. The group and its leader, Amr Dawara, a talented director, had finally tired of their ambiguous status and the many thorny problems it raised. They decided to venture into the world of sanity and legality. The society was formed and officially registered not only with the Ministry of Social Affairs in Egypt, but also with the International Union of Amateur Theatre Societies in Denmark.

"We were the 37th member, the first developing country to join the Union. We even joined before Japan," declares Dawara proudly. "We started with a very small budget. The annual membership fee was only two pounds and we were very few in the beginning. The subscriptions amounted to very little. But we were lucky in the first two years. We managed to squeeze out of the Ministry of Social Affairs a LE 300 annual grant."

ESTA now boasts a membership of 2000, but their annual subscriptions barely manage to cover the running costs. The shortage of funds, however, is not ESTA'S biggest problem. The society is still without a permanent home.

"We have to beg around for a place every time we give a festival

or set up a training programme for our members. We have built up over the years an excellent theatre library, but we have no place to put it. The books are stored in the homes of some of the members," Dawara bitterly complains. "We usually work in youth centres," he adds.

Dawara dreams of a place with enough space for a library, a theatre, workshops, lecture halls and a few accommodation facilities. "Most of our members are poor; they cannot afford hotel bills," he explains. "When members from the provinces visit Cairo, we usually end up putting them up in our own homes. This is not always feasible. I am lucky I have my own place, but very few of our Cairene members do."

Ironically, it was this concern for the welfare of his provincial members that made Dawara lose the chance of having a permanent home for the society. When the Chamber Theatre in Ramses Street (now the Youth Theatre) was dismantled in 1986, Dawara managed to convince the then Minister of Culture, Dr Ahmed Haykal, to house ESTA in the building. At the last moment, however, a famous director let the cat out of the bag and mumbled something about Dawara's "designs on the building!" The question of security was brought up, and, as usual, when security rears its head, art jumps out of the window.

Dawara, however, remains undaunted. "We have members all over the country, not just in Cairo. It is enough that they finance their own shows. How can I ask them to come to Cairo at their own expense for the annual festival which lasts 10 days?!"

Is there hope? "Yes," Dawara asserts vehemently. "But only if enough people rally round us and speak up for us. It would take only a very small signature from the governor of Cairo or Giza, or any other governorate, to give us a home. But even if this should prove a mirage, there is hope. This year we got LE 20,000 from the Cultural Development Fund. People are beginning to realise that we matter. The money will go towards finding a home if all else fails."

Is it the first time the society gets money from the state since the vanishing grant of the Ministry of Social Affairs?

"No. In 1988 we were promised a LE 15,000 grant but we never cashed the cheque."

What happened?

"A certain bureaucrat (who shall remain nameless but whose name is available if the matter is legally brought up) demanded a LE 5000 cut. I would gladly have forgone the five thousand for the sake of the ten if only he would have agreed to make the deal public to the other members of the society. As it was, I would have been accused of pocketing the money myself. So, I returned the cheque."

Dawara has been associated with ESTA since its inception and seems to have dedicated his whole life to the cause of amateur theatricals. He even went on to write an MA thesis on the subject. Nevertheless, he insists on giving the credit for the society's foundation and survival to many others.

"At the start we had with us Ahmed Mukhtar, Hussam Abul-Ela, Azza El-Husseni and the poet Omar Nijm, who chaired the society in 1984. The society also drew a lot of strength and support from playwright Mohamed Salmawy, director Karam Mutawi, critic Ahmed Sakhsoukh and its latest chairman Magdi Mujahid, who heads the Comedy Theatre and is currently hosting the seventh festival of ESTA at his own headquarters in Mohamed Farid Theatre."

Was this why he was chosen chairman?

"I would be a liar if I said that it did not come into it. But it was only one of many reasons. The man is an artist and he believes in us. Why else would he do it anyway? It is drudgery and unpaid work. There is no glory in it either. The mass media insists on neglecting us and assumes a disgustingly haughty and condescending air towards us."

What about the standard of the shows this year?

He was immediately on the defensive. "You have to remember the times we are living in. Theatre, even the state-funded theatre, is deteriorating everywhere. I cannot deny that our 1984 festival was much better, artistically speaking, than our current one. Anybody can see that. El-Gretly made his public debut in that festival with a monodrama for Abla Kamel. Youssef Chahine picked her up at once. We are proud of Hassan El-Gretly and Abla. Nur El-Sherif, too, directed film actor Ahmed Abdel-Warith in a monodrama called *A Fig for my Life*. The society was also the nurturing ground for playwright Yehya Gad, and a bunch of talented young directors like Hamdi Abdel-Aziz, Asim Ra'fat and Fathi El-Koofi. They all work professionally now. I cannot deny that the standard is deteriorating. But we need money. And, above all, a home."

And he was right. Judging by the number of shows I was able to see out of the 40 scheduled entries crammed in 10 days, yes...the standard is deteriorating. Knowledge and training are in short supply. And, Yes, these people need a permanent home, a place where we could find them if we want to help. But artistic standards apart, one has to admit that these people are honest, and they do love the theatre. They at least still believe in its validity as action, social and cultural, and as a means of communication. Through them we can keep in touch with the changes and modulations in Egyptian youth culture and consiousness and, perhaps, do something intelligent to stem the tide of fundamentalism. After all, is it not better to have young people doing amateur theatricals than have them growing long beards and holding machine-guns?! Aren't these people our first line of defence against the bigotism that slaughtered Farag k?!

What are we doing for them? Putting their backs against the wall? Building up their sense of marginality and homelessness?! Driving them up a horrible dark spout? These young people are our only hope and chance for survival, and they are much better equipped to defend the cause of enlightenment than all the military arsenal of the Ministry of Interior. In the sixties, the cry in England was: "Make love, not war." Now, the slogan should be: "Make theatre."

When the light of day fades into sunset in the countryside, something else fades with it, especially if you are young. The promise of joy and enjoyment. With no theatres, cafés0, cinemas, libraries, or any kind of social activity, what else is there to do, except slink away to some bearded, addle-brained, bigoted nook to find a sense of company and human solidarity. And, mind you, there is no short supply of such nooks in our Egyptian countryside.

The slogan of the festival, even though not declared, was: "Theatre as a forum for debate and protest." We should let these young people speak and help them to help us. They may not be artistically sophisticated, and may not know the intricacies of theatrical theory and practice, but they love the theatre and believe in it to the extent of supplying it out of their own threadbare pockets. Shouldn't we do something? Shouldn't the state do something before the days of doom and gloom catch us napping?!

The Cairo International Experimental
Theatre Festival: 27th Aug. 1992.

Dramatic Experiment

The side dishes look quite promising. They include a three-day symposium on major experimentation in the theatre - its theory and practice, its critical reception and its future in the Arab world.

The participants include a number of world-renowned theatre personalities like Polish director Jozef Szajna; Jean Pierre Vincent from France and his younger compatriot, Jean Simonot; Jose Monleon from Spain; Franco Quadri from Italy; Francisco Nieva, another Spaniard; plus a host of Arab and Egyptian *hommes et femmes de theatre*. For the first three mornings of the festival they will grapple with the thorny issues of experimentation in English, French and Arabic in the small hall of the Opera House.

The side cultural dishes also feature some interesting lectures on particular aspects of modern experimental theatre. The most exciting of these is series of four lectures about prominent directors in Polish theatre, to be delivered from 3-6 p.m. by Polish director Krzysztof Domagalik.

The lectures, which will take place at the newly refurbished video hall of the Cinema Institute, also feature video recordings of such famous plays as Grotowski's *Acropolis*. Szajna's *Replika* and Kantor's *I*

Shall Never Return. I had the pleasure of meeting Mr Domagalik in Tunisia during the Carthage festival and have seen his recordings. They are quite a treasure.

Music too has its place on the fringe menu, including a seminar about Sayyed Darwish and his role in adapting Arab music for the stage. Also scheduled are a number of encounters with some of the festival's famous guests, and a round-table discussion on the 9th will round up its cultural activities.

On the 10th, during the closing ceremony at the Opera House, the following artists will be cited for outstanding contribution to the theatre: Jozef Szajna (Poland); Tony Harrison (G.B); Jean Pierre Vincent (France); Francisco Nieva (Spain); Peter Oslzi (Czechoslovakia); Walid Ikhlasi (Syria); Thuraya Jubran (Morocco); Fadi Jaibi (Tunisia); Abdul Qadir Allula (Algeria); and from Egypt, Ahmad Abdel-Halim and Ahmad Zaki.

And now we come to the main courses, i.e., the competing entries in the festival's contest. The menu looks rich and varied with plenty of choice.

It is not yet clear whether Egypt will enter the contest; no production has been named yet. Several plays, however, are being considered and some are still to be viewed. At the newly-opened Hanager theatre at the Opera House, at the Avant-garde Theatre, the National, El-Samer, the Youth Theatre and many other theatrical pockets and spaces, rehearsals are going on at a feverish pace, and the festival's artistic committee keeps trudging from place to place, watching as many as five productions a day and eliminating up to four of these!

Out of the ones that escape elimination, one might be chosen to represent Egypt in the contest, but all will play on the fringe of the festival and some of them are well-worth watching. Of these, I especially recommend the late Mansour Mohamed's Studio 90's production, called *Post Script*, Khalid Galal's production of Ionesco's *Macbett*, an adaptation of Cocteau's *Antigone* with poems by Salah Abdel-Saboor, Amal Dunqul and Naguib Suroor, together with choral patches from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, and a crazy disco dance. Equally promising is Intisar Abdul Fattah's *The Book of Exiles*, Hanaa Abdel-Fattah's production of Samuel Beckett's *Play* and Sherif Subhi's theatrical reworking of Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Athol Fu-

gard's *A Place with the Pigs*, directed by Abdel-Sattar El-Khudari, is also worth seeing.

Despite the range of productions on offer during the festival, I cannot vouch for the quality. I am not quite sure that the 14 foreign entries and the 16 Arab ones are the best available. And here we come to a point of crucial importance. As a member of the festival's executive committee, I should not have any doubts about the quality of the guest shows. But I have.

This pinpoints the major drawback in the festival's planning. For various political, but mainly financial reasons, the festival has relinquished its responsibility for selecting the theatre companies and productions it presents.

After last year's festival, American playwright and director Laura Farabough , who participated as a juror, sent a report to the Minister of Culture. Here are some extracts:

"1. CIFET (The Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre) needs to have agents or consultants who travel around the world looking at the theatre and making recommendations of what companies to invite to participate in the festival.

2.The process of judging and presenting awards should be eliminated."

Further on, she explains:

"It is always an uneasy relationship between experimental art and the state. Therefore, asking state agencies to make the selection of what theatre companies they will send to represent their countries, politicises the selection process. Odds are the state does not know or does not approve of the best experimental theatre company in their country. This was certainly made manifest at CIFET where the majority of the companies were amateur and mediocre...

The theatre festivals of Edinburgh, Avignon, Zurich and Los Angeles, for example, all have agents who travel throughout the world looking at theatre and making recommendations and selections. A theatre festival must be curated if it is to be reputable."

On the question of awards, she writes:

"The dispensing of awards is antithetical to experimental art. CIFET should be an opportunity for artists from various countries and

cultures to meet each other, see each others' work, and learn from their differences and commonalities. A competative atmosphere discourages this from happening. Because it is ultimately impossible to make universally true judgements about art, particularly experimental theatre, the end result of award-giving is not accordance and elation, but cynicism."

This is certainly a most accurate diagnosis of the festival's ailments, and though the doing away with the contest might prove a controversial issue (the minister of culture himself is very much behind the contest and regards it as an incentive), very few people will disagree with Ms Farabough's other recommendation.

The trouble is, however, that selecting your own shows does not come cheap. The festival's relatively meagre budget can neither finance agents nor pay companies if they refuse to perform gratis. There is a political side to the issue as well, at least as far as the Arab countries are concerned. One single production can cause a diplomatic crisis. One has only to remember what happened with Mansour Mohamed's *The Game* at the opening last year. The hornet's nest it stirred up cost the young director his career and possibly his life. Tragically he died of an heart attack earlier this year.

The financial and political constraints on the choice of artistic ingredients gives the *grand chef* of the festival, its chairman Dr Fawzi Fahmi very little room to play with. He compensates for this by inviting, whenever possible, reputable companies and productions to play on the fringe of the festival.

He takes the initiative sometimes, too, and makes definite requests to foreign state agencies. This year, for example, he invited on his own initiative the Romanian Teatrul Masca company which proved so popular with the Egyptian public last year. They are bringing *Hey You! The Death is Dead!* and I am certainly looking forward to it.

By way of compensation, too, Dr Fawzi Fahmi has launched a series of publications on theatre (they number 10 this year) and expends a lot of care and effort on the festival's cultural activities, managing to come up every year with a number of provocative topics.

In her above-mentioned report, Ms Farabo especially commends this aspect of the festival and it is only fair to quote her praise as we

quoted her criticisms. She says: "CIFET organised several very important panel discussions. Again, the ministry of culture and the management of the festival astound me with their courage and willingness to tackle extremely complex and controversial issues in an open form."

Follows is a complete list of the productions taking part in the contest.

Foreign entries:

Armenia - *Tales.*

Britain - *Forbidden Realm* (a modern dance show).

Finland - *Life's Film.*

France - *Catalogue d'un Bonheur Sans Histoire.*

Germany - *Why the Sky is So Very High? Adventures of a Clown travelling round the world.*

Hungary - *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

Italy - *Sotto la tavola* and *Paneblu (Under the Table* and *Blue Bread).*

Japan - *Shut Out! Like a Dreaming Dead Child.*

Lithuania - *The Old Woman.*

Moldova - *Waiting for Godot.*

Philipines - *Bathala - The legend of Suwana and Mono Kawa.*

Poland - *Theatre is a Woman .*

Romania - *Hey You! The Death is Dead.*

Uzbekistan - *Dr. Asainst's Will, or Stars on the Palm.*

Venezuela - *With the Left Hand.*

Arab entries:

Algeria - *The Wolf's Wedding.*

Bahrain - *Caricature.*

Emirates - *Gamila.*

Jordan - *Who Is There?*

Kuwait - *The Fire.*

Lebanon - *The Secret Pocket.*

Libya - *A Writer Who has Written Nothing.*

Morocco - *Taqtouqa (A little Song).*

Palestine - *Night Traveller.*

Qatar - *The Masks*

Saudi Arabia - *Echoes.*

Sudan - *Four Men and a Rope.*

Syria - *The Death of an Anarchist*

Tunisia - *Kleenex.*

'Outcasts' Open Festival and 'Hunchback' Runs for Egypt

For some reason, it seems that director Intisar Abdul Fattah has been wantonly doomed to play the role of impresario at CIFET's inaugural ceremonies. I say doomed because, according to the Festival's regulations, if you are chosen to officiate at this occasion, you are automatically disqualified as contestant. This honour aslo caries the penalty of allowing you only one performance during the Festival while others may get up to four performance slots on the programme. What is worse, the festive atmosphere of the opening seems to rub off on the work, reducing the level of audience attention and barring any serious critical appreciation. In nine cases out of ten, spectators subconsciously catalogue it as an occasion piece, and it is very hard afterwards, however good the show, to shake off the association and see it on its own merit as an independent, viable work of art.

Last year, Intisar's *Tarnima* (Hymn), a beautiful ballet and choral work, suffered such a fate. It played at the Festival's opening, was hugely admired and quickly forgotten! After ten days of theatrical banqueting and surfeiting no one so much as gave it a cursory thought. Curiously it was never revived afterwards. What a great work was here overthrown, as Ophelia would say!

Intisar's present experiment, *The Book of Outcasts,* took months of research, preparation and hard work. The result is extremely rewarding. It seems as if all the director's previous experiments have been drafts or preliminary sketches for it. Sound, in the form of instrumental music, percussion, vocals, chanting and rhythmical verbal delivery, has always played the leading role in Intisar's work; this is perhaps natural, since he was initially trained as a musician. His musical experience, however, took a sharp, dramatic turn after his stay in Poland. There he joined some experimental theatre workshops and the influence of those years is unmistakable in his present work. There he learnt how to make music and theatre out of the simplest sounds, objects and actions of daily life: clapping, hammering, stamping, humming, banging tins, washing tubs or pipes, turning a wheel, the *mu'ezzins* call to prayer, the lamentations for the dead, the yells of joy and the tinkling of cutlery and kitchen-ware.

In his earlier *El-Darabukka* (Egyptian drum), which had the good fortune of not opening the Festival, and, therefore, had a reasonably good run, as runs go in Egypt, this incongruous medley of movements and sounds took on a breath-taking freshness and significance as they were used to explore the questions of identity and belonging, and the relation between past and present, myth and daily practices. The work was original in both senses of the word: It was novel and unusual, also deeply rooted in Egyptian soil.

The same is true of the *Outcasts*, which is even more complex, more virtuosic and technically smoother than *El-Darabukka.* The theme is the elusiveness of life, and the central metaphor, the quest. A traveller, journeying in search of true life, encounters first his shadow who parts from him, then other lost souls and fellow ragged travellers, next a man in white tails and a red bow-tie who proves to be death and, finally, a seductive, tantalizing woman who turns out at once to be life and a siren. When death wins at the end, after a battle-cum-dance, the traveller discovers, ironically, the meaning of his quest. The final scene is yet another variation on the metaphor of the journey which takes here the image of sailing after the images of running, trudging and the train.The traveller stands behind an empty wooden frame with two extra side bars, loose at the bottom. He picks up these and moves them like oars. The linking of death with the image of the boat suggests at once Charon, the ferryman of the dead in Greek my-

thology and the two night and day boats of the Pharaonic sun-god. As the two images merge, the scene becomes paradoxical, suggesting life and death. And when the traveller suddenly stops rowing and stretches up his arms, shaping with the bars two wings, and freezes, he becomes the image of the ancient Egyptian symbol of the soul, the *ba*, i.e., a bird with the head of a man. He also evokes the Egyptian Greek myth of the rising Phoenix and a host of other sacred birds in many mythologies.

Indeed, the whole visual and auditory composition of the show draws heavily on the archetypal images embedded in myths and what Jung called the collective human unconscious and every detail partakes of the same paradoxical quality of the final image. Take the set for example: two structures of huge twisting and curving pipes flank the stage on both sides from top to bottom and end in big cavernous holes through which Death and Life appear and disappear. The forbidding metallic look of the pipes suggests the harshness and soullessness of the modern industrial world, making it the setting of the conflict; and while the holes suggest the womb, and the whole structure a coiled serpent (two more archetypal images), the idea of rats and sewers is never far off. It is as if every visual detail has been magically transformed into a musical note that resonates in the mind, creating waves of echo after it vanishes.

This brings us to the music which is indeed the moving and shaping spirit of the whole performance. Here oriental and folk singing are stunningly counterpointed with classical soprano vocalise and a variety of original sound-effects and percussion rhythms. Indeed, the soundscape of the performance needs the musical analytical powers of a music expert. But for the non-specialist, like me, it was wonderfully evocative and had a tremendous poetic impact. Moreover, by reworking in a different medium the dominant motifs of alienation and a sense of loss (embodied in Walid Awni's choreography and the stage design) Intisar Abdel-Fattah was able to expand them into universal experiences and, at the same time, intensify their immediate relevance to his Egyptian audiences. The vocal combat between the male folk singer and the soprano, who intermittently flitted across the scene, gave the central existential conflict a cultural edge: the quest for authentic existence become also a quest for authentic cultural identity.

Other aspects of the *Outcasts* deserve to be mentioned: the brilliant choreography, the happy choice of costumes, Samir Abdel Halim's excellent rendering of the traveller's part, Safaa El-Tookhi's will-o'-the-wisp presence as Life, Hanaa Abdel-Fattah's deliberately theatrical impersonation of Death, the ancient, but extremely versatile folk flute-player, the proficiency of the soprano and the folk-singer, and the ensemble of outcasts and wandering travellers.

If the Festival must have a contest (and I am personally against it), and if Egypt must take part in it, then Intisar Abdel Fattah's *Outcasts* should have been chosen to represent it. As it is, the production was irrevocably consigned (by consent or coercion) to the ceremonial opening night at the Big Hall of the Opera. This is bound to affect it in some degree, since it was designed and choreographed for the traverse stage of the Hanager Centre, with the audiences on both sides.

Instead of the *Outcasts*, Sherif Subhi's mime and dance rendition of Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* is to run for Egypt. It was originally a two-and-a-quarter hour marathon, but has been cut down to one hour five minutes at the suggestion of the Festival's artistic committee. Some religious symbols, too, had to be removed. The shadow of Mansour Mohamed's *Game* seems to dog the Festival still, and it certainly does not want the Egyptian Christians this time on its back.

Subhi is very talented, but also extremely young; his production bears the mark of both. It has all the advantages and drawbacks of a youthful first experience. The dividing lines between freshness and naiveté, vitality and inane boisterousness, boldness and pretentiousness get sometimes disconcertingly blurred. It is an uneven production, intermittently inspired and brisk of tempo, but often lacking in balance, tonal variety and technical finish. The total banishing of humour, too, did not work in Subhi's favour. He has yet to learn the Shakespearean lesson that tragedy and farce are two sides of one coin.The absence of humour does not make the hunchback into a tragic figure; it serves only to make him embarrassingly melodramatic. The vivacious carnival scene and Esmeralda's tryst with her lover beside the humanised statue who writhes in pain as they carve their names on it are certainly funny. But that is not humour. I mean by the word the director's ability to project his characters in a double perspective and make the audience sympathise with them while laughing at them. Hugo's original

text is surely melodramatic, but the writing compensates for that. Here, neither the movement nor the music give adequate compensation.

As a first attempt, however, the *Hunchback* is very promising and deserves a lot of encouragement. Whether it is fit to represent Egypt in the Festival's contest is another question and remains an open one.

Cairo: 10th Sept. 1992

For Whom Will The Bells Ring?

For those who took the trouble to drive to the Cinema Institute at noon in the scorching summer heat of Cairo, it was an infinitely rewarding experience. The invaluable video tapes of Kantor's *Wielopole, Wielopole* and *I Shall Never Return,* and Szajna's *Replika* have proved so far the most interesting and thrilling items in the Festival. Commenting sardonically on what he has seen of the Festival so far, a critic remarked, "These plays ought to be in the competition." And you cannot really blame him. After seven days of feverish playwatching and nearly 22 out of the 30 competing productions, there is no clear favourite.

Counting out the Arab entries, which are still in an early stage of theatrical evolution, with the exception, possibly, of Tunisia's and Lebanon's, none of the foreign shows have won a clear majority among the critics. The Romanians, despite their artistry and popularity, could not match their thunderous success of last year. It was not that their present *Hey You, The Death Is Dead* was deficient in any respect; their clowning was as excellent as ever and their iconoclastic vigour remains undiminished. For the audience, however, something of their former freshness had worn off, a feeling of *déjà vu* hung in the

air like a thin mist. This was inevitable, I suppose. In festivals like this, audiences usually rate novelty, however crass, above genuineness, and their avidity for surprises seems boundless. For me, however, it was sheer joy to see the super clown Mihai Malaimare once more and share in the troupe's revelries.

The Philippines which brought an American musical to last year's Festival, this year brought *Bathala,* which draws almost totally on Filipino sources, whether in its legendary folk material, acting methods, its choreography, scenography or music, and was received with resounding applause; two additional performances were arranged for the company.

This could not be said, unfortunately, of the British choice which, for many, was extremely puzzling and very unfair (indeed) to the Bi Ma dance company. If the Bi Ma had come on tour, on another occasion, it would have been appreciated as a sample of one aspect of the current British theatre scene. But to represent Britain, with its magnificent history of theatre! To represent the land of Shakespeare!!

The critics were bemused and their heads buzzed with conjectures. The sympathetic ones said, "It is the guilt complex once more; the British wish to make amends for their colonial past and emphasise the new multiracial face of Britain." The more malevolent ones commented, "they don't see us as worthy of their best productions; it is the same colonial haughtiness once more." The issue of budgets and financing was brought up and someone murmured, "their best experimental theatre is in Edinburgh right now." In short, people talked around the show and not about it and discussed everything except its artistic merit, which is a great pity. What made things worse is that dance shows, in the view of many critics, do not qualify as proper theatre. Despite their mystical beauty, their novel and evocative choreograpy and music, the Bi Ma's *Beyond the Legend* and *Forbidden Realm* were for the Egyptian critics something of a Lhasa - the once forbidden city of Tibet.

This does not mean, of course, that the eloquent art of Pit Fong Loh and Ming Yam Low should be so easily and unfairly dismissed. Perhaps on another occasion, when all the dust of controversy and the competition fever have subsided, we shall have more to say about them.

It struck some people as ironical, in view of the British choice, that the Hungarians should bring over Shakespeare - decked up in the best experimental robes. Their production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* partook of the magic, the airy charm, the whimsicality and elusiveness of the original text. With plenty of fluttering white gauze, two swings, inspired costumes for both humans and fairies, and Puck multiplied by three, who could resist it? The visual interpretation, in terms of movement and gesture, framed many of the subtle nuances of the text and brought out its bubbling humour and deep pathos. As the images flowed, we were drawn into the world of dreams and fairy tales. And when the quartet of lovers woke up after their night of confusion, with their clothes dishevelled, as if after a night's orgy (Lysander actually had his pants down), their bewilderment was painfully moving. They looked completely dazed and hopelessly lost. They did not know who they were, where they were, or whom they loved. In an unforgettable moment, the sense of loss takes the image of a tangle of eight hands, each trying desperately to find its true companion.

The Hungarian production bespoke a great love for Shakespeare and a deep understanding of his vision. This was no more evident than when, suddenly, they switched from Hungarian to English, giving us the words of the Bard. It was a moving tribute to the source of their poetry and magic, and its power was almost unbearable - at least for those who know the play in the original.

The rest of the 10 shows I watched were tolerable, but generally mediocre. Singapore made the fatal mistake of bringing a family drama in English and was met with the same critical reception as the Philippines last year. But, putting that aside, the acting was very good, the extremely simple set (made of three cage-like boxes) was intelligent and versatile, and the choice of a small arena acting space created the sense of intimacy necessary for this type of drama. What saves the show ultimately, however, form turning into a typical TV soap opera is its conception and structure. To the story of the breaking up of a middle-class family and the overflow of memories, apparitions and skeletons in the cupboard, the director added a second story, or, rather, a number of scenes about three workers trapped under the rubble of a collapsed building. For me, those scenes with their sound effects and voice-overs were the genuinely theatrical highlights of the evening. Here the actors' bodies twisted in and out of the cage-like boxes and

their language acquired an authentic ring, despite (or perhaps because of) the mutilated English. Those scenes were not simply a translation into a visual metaphor of the central drama's dominant theme: they formed by themselves a moving and haunting drama.

Japan was a bit of a disappointment. The plight of the victims of AIDS is definitely a very worthy subject and could, in fact, and in good hands, work as a metaphor for the plight of all minorities and social misfits. *Shut Out - Like a Dreaming Dead Child,* however, was "bathetic" rather than pathetic - with all the metallic frames and the sterilised, synthesised, modern look of the set and all the video screens. Formally and technically, the Japanese *Shut Out* was a pale imitation of their last year's entry.

Moldovia's *Waiting for Godot* felt like a resurrection ritual, and a failed one at that. "Grandfather Beckett" was written all over it in bold letters. Unfortunately, what was shocking and experimental in the fifties is no longer so. Theatre, and especially experimental theatre, has gone beyond the absurd and sailed deep into the ridiculous, as a member of the American La Mama company once said. Resurrecting Godot (who never even existed, even theatrically) seems a disservice to a great artist who deeply believed in the ephemerality of all phenomena, including his own theatre, and who used theatre as a field for existential, philosophical and artistic research.

As for the Armenian *Tales* and the Uzbek *Stars on a Palmtree,* I am sure they could prove very interesting, if only we could understand them. They are visually, and in terms of pure sound, very opaque. And when language is the dominant medium of communication with an audience who does not understand it, I usually opt for silence. But of vigour and vitality and colour, there was no shortage.

This is the picture so far. But more is still to come in the few remaining days. By design or coincidence, some of the most anticipated shows have been consigned to the last days of the Festival. France, Germany, Finland, Venezuela and Poland have not played yet. Through photographs the French have already built up among the public great expectations. Will they fulfill them?! The Venezuelans have chosen an enchanting site for their *Left Hand* - the Pyramids' *Son et Lumière* theatre. Will they triumph with the audience as the Greeks did last year? And the Germans are bringing the adventures of a clown on

tour. How will they compare with the superb clowning of the Masca Theatre's super clown?

We are all busy pondering these questions and betting has not yet started. I have my own tips, but let us wait and see for whom the bells will triumphantly ring.

Sound and Fury...

Our revels now are ended. The lights are down and the actors have departed. But in the windswept *Son et Lumiere* theatre, the scene of the closing ceremony, dismay and bitter disappointment will linger for a long time like a noisome smell. For three years, the contest, despite its many critics, had guarded well its impartiality and been remarkably free of political manipulation. This year's awards, however, have dealt it a deadly blow and soured up the whole festival.

Unlike every year, the awards were announced in a press conference at noon, hours before the ceremony. It was as if the jury had anticipated the furore their verdict would cause and decided to allow people time to absorb the shock and cool down. The wires buzzed furiously all afternoon and gradually stunned incredulity gave way to mockery and cynicism. It was naive of us, many said, to think that politics would leave the festival alone for long; and when we made our way to the Pyramids in the evening, it was not to celebrate with the winners, but to commiserate with the undeserving losers.

It is not that the Lebanese *Secret Pocket* and the Syrian *El-Naw* (The Storm) are not tolerable in themselves and are, arguably, the best Arab entries. It is simply that they cannot begin to compare with the

Hungarian *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which remained a clear favourite throughout, or with the superb French *Catalogue d'un Bonheur*, or the stunning Venezuelan With the Left Hand, not to mention Romania's *The Death Is* Dead and Philippine's *Bathala*. Each of these has its own individual style and its unique appeal. But they have one thing in common - the poetry of theatre. If anyone deserved the award for best production, it was one of these, especially since Finland, Britain and Germany were out of the running. The Finns left their props behind in London and could not play; Britain brought a dance show; and the German *Adventures of a Clown*, minus props and one actor, was a veritable disaster.

It was obvious to everybody that the international panel of judges this year, especially its non-Arab members, were pressurised to give the Arabs a slice of the cake and limit the choice of best production to Arab entries alone. When questioned about the criteria of their choice, an Arab member of the panel said that the Lebanese production shows the marked influence of the Western theatre, especially Kantor's (it is actually a slightly modified version of Kantor's *The Dead Class)*, while the Syrian draws on popular Arab traditions and forms of entertainment! The two, in short, represent the two dominant trends in contemporary Arab theatre. When pressed to explain the exclusion of all foreign entries from the award, he grew flustered and recited the list of awards. You couldn't get more out of him.

If this policy continues, the festival would do well to follow the example of the Carthage festival of Tunisia and limit the competition to the Arabs alone. Better still, it would be wise to abolish it altogether before the festival loses all its credibility and good name.

Some of the other awards were also quite ridiculous. The Moldovian *Waiting for Godot* got best direction on the strength of a few music-hall acts and some naive lighting gimmicks. The French were given, ironically, the award for scenography! - ironically because in a production like Dominique Soria's and Pierre Fournet's *Catalogue*, what is usually termed scenography does not qualify at all as scenography here.

The lighting, the projected images, the gigantic tulips, the small elephants and all the other objects are the body and soul of the show. If you remove them, there is nothing left. You can speak of scenography

in *Midsummer* or *The Left Hand* (and what beautiful scenography); but in *Catalogue*, arranging the objects and changing the scene is the action, and the meaning or meanings build up through the tension between shapes and sizes, sounds and images. Here the soundtrack by Catherine Lagarde and ALIS (Association Lieux Images Sons) was beautiful, warm and moving; it contrasted sharply with the silence, the mechanical movements and icy absence of all expression on the stage.

In their grey and black costumes which suggested at once children, clowns and spacemen, Soria and Fournet looked like children at play, minus the noise and joy, and their arrangement of the successive scenes invariably reminded me of children's drawings. Nevertheless, their various images of happiness were always tinged with sadness and breathed an awareness of the transience of life.

When someone with an opaque sensibility described the *Catalogue* disparagingly as 'fit for children', he didn't realise the wisdom of his words. It is fit for children but in the sense which Wordsworth meant when he described the child as father of the man. Like *Alice in Wonderland* or *Midsummer*, it awakens our sense of wonder, takes us into a magical world, removes the film of habit from our eyes to make us recover something of the freshness of vision that is the privilege of only children and artists, and something of their natural wisdom.

The passion and violence of the Venezuelan *With the Left Hand* contrasted sharply with the austere emotional restraint of the French. Here a folk legend from the Andes about a coming saviour who ends up destroying the whole village is dramatised with poems by Lorca and others, and given clear political implications. The saviour, whose name means actually "Left Hand", represents the political left, a dumb peasant woman the oppressed people, and a Red Indian their indigenous culture. There are other characters too who symbolise the different forces and conflicting interests in Venezuelan life - the poet, the businessman, the priest, the bride . . . etc. But apart from the story, the poetry and the arraignment of the left, the performance was visually thrilling and had a savage kind of beauty. Director Marco Boroy did well to choose the *Son et Lumiere* site.

The performance makes extensive use of sand in its ritual and fighting scenes. In a traditional theatre, this would have required at least three tons of sand. Besides, the site itself is extremely charming

and Boroy made very good use of it. Instead of disappearing into the wings, the actors dissolved into the shadows on both sides or slide down the hill at the back of the performing area.

The still figures, gazing into the distance, in silent vigil, waiting for the saviour, were framed by the darkness, the desert and the softly lit pyramids at the back. It was an unforgettable composition to which Boroy's costumes, colour scheme and sensitive lighting-plan added not a little.

Indeed, this still visual composition and others were used like recurrent motifs throughout the performance to counterpoint the scenes of passion and violence. It was a fine and delicate balance. Also unforgettable was the final scene, with the saviour dangling in the air from a noose attached to the top of a metal frame with three perpendicular bars which constituted the whole set.

I can not remember the last time I saw a love-making scene on the stage so nobly enacted, a ritual that did not ring false or passionate acting without the slightest hint of melodrama. Unlike most of the so-called experimental shows nowadays, this one depended heavily on language. But despite the linguistic barrier,Boroy and his team succeeded in keeping us glued to our seats till the end.

From the jury of the official contest, the Venezuelans got a certificate of commendation together with the young Egyptian director Sherif Sobhi and the actress Soad Abdel-karim who played Jamila for the United Arab Emirates and actress Karen Tan from Singapore. The Venezuelans, however, were not commended for their art, but for their role in fostering the ties between Latin America and the Arab World!!

The Egyptian critics, however, saw differently and, one might add, more fairly. In their awards, *With the Left Hand and A Midsummer* shared the nomination for best direction. The award for best production, however, was deliberately withheld in protest against the generally low standard of this year's shows, with the exception of the five I mentioned at the beginning.

This unfortunately forced them to make the same mistake as the official jury and nominate France for best scenography. They wanted to reward *Catalogue's* creators for all the *bonheur* they gave them, and it was the only prize left. But at least they knew they were making a mistake and that the award should have been for best production or direction.

The whole issue of awards ought to be seriously rethought. No one can tolerate awards like this year's once more. The funny thing is that many of the foreign members of the contest's jury object to the idea of competition. I remember Martin Esslin telling me last year that he was at a loss what criteria to apply and Laura Farabough, another member of last year's jury, wrote to the Minister of Culture, urging him to do away with the competition. The relevant extract from her report was printed on this page thee weeks ago - and 'O, my prophetic soul'!



Appendices

Appendix (I)

The Voices of Silence:
Women Playwrights in Egypt

1 - In the Beginning was the Body

Reading through the history of theatre, one is immediately struck by the total silence of women's voices in the classical traditions. In classical Japanese drama, men usurped the roles of women, and still do in Noh and Kabuki plays. In classical Greece and Rome, the story was the same; women, who were allowed few economic and legal rights, were denied access to the stage and forbidden to attend performances. The ban also covered slaves!

The only females who could perform in public were the street mimes and dancers whose art was, by definition, a silent one; they spoke in the only medium their patriarchal culture allowed them – the language of the body. The fact that they were also slaves explains why sometimes they had to sell their sexual favours together with their art. In a society which regarded the female body as property and exchangeable economic commodity, this was, perhaps, inevitable; it explains the label "actress-courtesans" which is attached to those early pioneers in many theatre histories; sadly the association of the two professions still persists in some societies.

Christianity did little to improve the situation for female artists in Europe. If anything, it virtually put a stop to all theatrical activities.

Curiously, however, it was from the folds of the church that the first known woman playwright emerged. In the mid-tenth century, when there was virtually no theatre in western Europe, a nun of the Holy Roman Empire wrote six dramatic texts in her convent in Gandersheim (in what is known now as Germany). Fittingly, she adopted the name Hrotsvit, which means "strong voice"; she had broken the silence of centuries.

Hrotsvit's plays were a brave attempt to challenge the images of women inherited from classical drama. However, since they were never performed (except perhaps within the confines of her own convent), they had little impact. Her voice is like a clap of thunder that helps only to intensify our sense of the silence that oppressed women centuries before she spoke, and was to continue for seven more centuries afterwards .

When theatre made a comeback in the renaissance, women found themselves once more excluded form the stage and their roles, including the great Shakespearean ones expropriated by males in drag; imagine Cleopatra played by a boy! When women were finally admitted into the male province of theatre as actresses and writers, they were either treated in the classical fashion as actress-courtesans, or arranged for immorality and accused of plagiarism. Many of them found it expedient to conform to the dominant cultural codes and, indirectly, helped to enforce the inherited images and gender-specific social roles. Nevertheless, the 17th century was a definite watershed in the history of women and theatre in the west. They broke the masculine monopoly on the spoken word on stage and there was no stopping their voices afterwards .

At this point, the reader may wonder why an article about women playwrights in Egypt should take for its starting point the fortunes of their sisters in the west. The answer is simply that whenever a patriarchal system obtains, women, whatever their country or religion, invariably end up in the same boat. The history of theatre in Egypt may be considerably longer or shorter than in the west, depending on one's position in the controversy over the meaning of the word. But whether we go along with E. Drioton's claim that theatre was known and practised in ancient Egypt, or maintain with his opponents that it was not known until the 19th century, one fact remains clear: in either

case, the written text remained for long the property of men and it was often inscribed on women's bodies and voices.

Compared to later periods, the lot of women in ancient Egypt was an enviable one. As wives, they were treated with courtesy, allowed to share the husband's tomb as well as his bed, and to accompany him not only on his fishing trips and outings, but also on official occasions, such as receiving a gift from the Pharaoh. Nevertheless, they seldom ruled, rarely became priestesses, were privately educated, if at all, never became scribes or held public offices.

Very little, however, is known about the social status and way of life of the females who took part in the religious rituals or other public performances. One assumes that those chosen to impersonate the goddesses Isis and Nephtis were treated with respect. But what about the other female dancers, singers and performers who entertained on other occasions, private or public?

The essentially patriarchal nature of ancient Egyptian society persisted into the subsequent Graeco-Roman and Christian eras, growing harsher and more intolerant towards women. As Eve replaced Isis, the female body became irredeemably the site of sin and women were taught to distrust their own voices, even in private. For centuries afterwards, written language and the public arena were to remain, almost exclusively, male.

Islam gave women many rights and privileges but stopped short of abolishing slavery or advocating the complete equality of the sexes. It could not, therefore, erode the many prejudices against women in the cultures it subsumed under its banner. Consequently, in Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo or Cordova, or any Islamic city, women continued to be confined to the same roles they had played earlier in Greece and Rome.

Entertaining the master, his wives, and his male guests at banquets was one of those roles. Indeed, the female slave-entertainer forms a permanent feature of the "harem" in any Islamic period, and the entertainment was by no means exclusively artistic. Like their sisters in Classical Greece and Rome, those women spoke in the language of the body, addressing the senses as dancers and singers, and were valued as much for their sex appeal as for their art.

Away from the harems, in the streets and market-places, we find an Egyptian equivalent for the old Roman female mimes and dancers. In his *Modern Egyptians,* Edward Lane, writing in the early 19th century, speaks of "the Ghawazi" and other dancing-girls who "perform, unveiled, in the public streets, even to amuse the rabble".

Dr. Magda Saleh has made "The Ghawazi of Egypt" the subject of a stimulating "Report" which she published in the Egyptian quarterly *Folklore* in 1987. The Report makes several interesting points; but the one that most concerns us here is that as early as the 16th century, and possibly a lot earlier than that, a tradition of public female performance existed, relying heavily on body language. It existed, it must be remembered, despite Islam's hostility to the public display of the female body and voice, and at least two centuries before Egypt became familiar with the European theatre.

The insights Dr. Saleh provides into the life-style of those women and their social status further corroborates their similarity to the earlier "actress-courtesans" of Greece and Rome. They were regarded as a moral menace, and their activities were sometimes banned. On one occasion, at least, they were exiled to Upper Egypt. Nevertheless, some of them "possessed considerable wealth" and they could "in the case of repentance", to quote Edward Lane, marry "a respectable Arab."

The same choice was open to the actress-courtesans in the Roman Empire in the 6th century, thanks to the charms of the famous mime and dancer Theodora. In *Feminism and Theatre,* Sue-Ellen Case tells the story of Emperor Justinian's infatuation with the erotic dancer and his wish to marry her.

"However, the law decreed that actress-courtesans could not become Roman citizens and thus could not become the legal wives of citizens. Justinian's desire, along with the new Christian concepts of repentance and salvation, produced the edict of 521 AD which declared that actress-courtesans could repent, renounce their profession and become the legal wives of Roman citizens."

Like the Roman citizen in the 6th century, the "respectable Arab" in the 19th could marry a public dancer without, as Lane points out, becoming "generally considered as disgraced by such a connection".

In both cases, too, respectability entailed the suppression of the performer's artistic talents and her withdrawal from public life. And, indeed, the connection between female respectability and public muteness and invisibility lingers to this very day. Recently, the number of Egyptian actresses who have "repented", renounced the profession and worn the veil has reached ten – a significant and mind-boggling fact!

When theatre arrived in Egypt from the West in the 19th century, the image of the actress-courtesan was one of its trappings. Initially, many productions were amateur and exclusively male. But as theatre became professional and commercial, directors and managers began to look around for women willing to act. They could only find them on the fringe of society, in minority groups, among expatriates, or in the economic lower depths.

One of the earliest pioneers in this direction was Ya'coob Sannu' who is regarded by many as the real founder of the Egyptian theatre. For his professional company, which lasted only two years, 1871-72, he hired two Jewish girls and undertook their training; both were illiterate. Milia Dayan and her sister were soon followed by others, and by the turn of the century, the phenomenon of the actress and actress-singer had become familiar .

The following thirty years saw a substantial rise in the number of Muslim actresses, some of whom possessed considerable talent. The fortunate ones secured a degree of social respectability by marrying into the profession or working in prestigious companies. Fatma Rushdi, who liked to be called "the Sarah Bernhardt of the east", did both. She married director and dramaturg Aziz Eid, and together they set up their own company in 1927. Behind the project was the couple's desire for more artistic freedom, but they soon ran into finanical trouble.

They had pawned some of their furniture to start the company but more funds were needed. Miss Rushdi soon found a reliable friend and sponsor in a Jewish businessman by the name of Eli Adrui. The story of the friendship is recorded in her memoirs published under the title *Kifahi* (my struggle). The friendship cost Miss Rushdi her marriage; she was divorced in 1928. The company, however, survived for seven years and the esxhusband continued to manage it and direct Miss Rushdi in her famous classical roles. The moral of the story is obvious.

The ghost of the actress-courtesan was a difficult one to exorcise, and it contributed not a little to the general view of theatre as a frivolous and dissolute profession. Even men, sometimes, were actively discouraged from pursuing it: Yusuf Wahbi's father publicly disowned him when he took up acting, and Tawfiq El-Hakim was summarily packed off to France when he showed a predilection for dramatic writing. Both resisted and went on to become leading figures in their respective fields. But it was a battle few women were qualified to wage.

In such an atmoshpere, and given the general antipathy to female self-expression and the many social conventions governing it, no woman playwright could be expected to emerge. For the woman playwright and director to be born, a radical change in the attitude to women and theatre was needed, and this did not come about, if at all, until the sixties, and for a very brief period.

That was the period when the government embraced the theatre and used it as an active weapon for propaganda and for social and ideaological change. Since then, twelve women are known to have written at least one play, but only six of them have managed to get one work or more performed on the stage. It seems that women playwrights in Egypt still have a long way to go, even though they have finally broken their silence.

The Voices of silence:
Women Playwrights in Egypt

2- To Speak or Not to Speak

The list of women playwrights in Egypt is depressingly short. When you have counted in everybody, including the one-timers and those who never made it to the stage, and even if you add for a bonus Amina El-Sawi who adapted some novels in the sixties, the number does not exceed eleven.

Compared to other Arab countries, however, Egypt does not seem to have done too badly in the space of forty years. Besides, if we were to expand our theme and make it "women dramatists in Egypt", we will find that at least six women have tried their hand at television drama. My business here, however, is with women who specifically wrote with the stage in mind.

The first of those was Sofi Abdallah whose *Sweepstake* was performed in 1951-52. The play, which is not available in either manuscript or print, was a social drama about the trials and tribulations of the poorer classes. Theatre historian Samir Awad remembers it as faintly reminiscent of Gorki's *Lower Depths,* and as technically unimpressive. There was nothing fresh or challenging about it in either stagecraft or point of view, he declares; it seems also to have had its fair share of sentimental morality, according to him.

The faults of the play may have been many, but they are the kind that one frequently comes across in first attempts even by men. Criticism, however, traditionally a masculine domain, tends to be particularly niggly and inordinately censorious when it comes to women. As early as the 17th century, Ephra Behn noted with bitterness this sad fact of literary life. It is a pity that Sofi Abdallah, the first Egyptian woman playwright, did not possess the stamina of her British counterpart. She never wrote another play and for years afterwards *Sweepstake* remained an oddity.

Sofi's example, however, together with the progressive ideas of the period, inspired other women to repeat the attempt. Saniya Qura'a followed with a group of historical plays. They received little critical notice and their theatrical viability was never tested in performance. Though published, all copies of the book seem to have evaporated; I am still trying to locate one. In the same boat with Qura'a's unstaged, vanished texts are the plays of Nadia Abdul Hamid which were published in the sixties. At the moment, no real appreciation of the merit of either writer can be made.

Next, we meet Amina El-Sawi, busy adapting novels for the stage, including Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*. El-Sawi, however, soon deserted the stage; she wore the veil, called herself an "Islamic writer" and devoted her energies to T.V. serialized religious drama. For the next burst of female dramatic activity we have to wait a number of years. And, indeed, it is at once a curious and sobering fact that the decade renowned as the golden age of the Egyptian theatre should have produced no female directors and only two original plays by women.

In 1968, the avant-garde branch of the National staged Layla Abdul Baset's one-acter *Papers, Papers!* It was to be the beginning of a long and ardous struggle to build up a career as a playwright and win recognition. Unexpectedly, Abdul Baset's marriage to director Abdul Ghaffar Ouda did not make it any easier for her. She was silent throughout the seventies, and her total output to date remains very meager. Apart from some television work and a couple of adaptations of foreign plays, she has written only four plays, three of which are in one act, and two are monodramas.

The only other woman writer to make it to the stage in the sixties was Fataheya El-Assal. Hussein Gom'a directed her *Swing* for the

Alexandria National in 1969 and *The Passport* followed in 1972 at the Gomhuriyya theatre. In the eighties, she produced two more plays; *Women Without Masks* was presented at El-Salam theatre, but not before the censor had axed the "women" from the title; *Betwixt and Between*, however failed to get a sponsor and eventually appeared in book-form. Currently, El-Assal is fighting hard to give her latest play, *Women's Prison*, a viewing chance.

With five full-length theatre pieces, countless radio plays, twenty T.V. plays and 22 T.V. drama serials, Miss El-Assal is by far the most prolific woman dramatist in Egypt and the Arab world. She is the only woman too who has made writing her sole profession and source of income. This appears all the more striking when we consider her beginnings. Indeed, she can be said to have had the most inauspicious childhood possible for a future writer.

Born into a family which believed that girls should be kept at home and ignorant, and rigorously coached in the rituals of female obedience, El-Assal never went to school and was denied a home education. Fortunately, she married journalist and would-be-novelist Abdallah El-Tookhi. Not only did he help her teach herself to read and write, but also coached her in left-wing politics and Marxist philosophy. At the first signs of her literary talent, he encouraged her to write and introduced her in the right circles. Understandably, El-Assal has little patience with the brand of feminism that regards man as the arch enemy.

"I have no quarrel with men," she asserts. "If anything, I am a man-lover," she adds laughing. "My quarrel is with capitalism and the patriarchal ideology and systems it has spawned," she goes on; "these are the forces that oppress both men and women." About the traditional images of women and the gender-specific division of social roles, she says: "some roles are imposed by nature, like child-bearing. I do not mind those, so long as they do not exclude other possible roles. I bore four children myself and enjoyed it. But I also enjoy writing. I would resent it very much if someone tried to stop me writing. But I would resent it equally if someone tried to stop me having children or looking feminine."

Not infrequently, El-Assal's moderate views have made her unpopular with the radical feminists. "The feeling is mutual," she con-

fesses. The first time she went to a Marxist meeting she was greeted with a lot of harsh criticism from her female comrades. " I was all dolled up and they were all in jeans and men's shirts, with their sleeves rolled up. I told them I was quite willing for my mind to be improved, but will not have my body tampered with". These women, she maintains, are as bad as the Islamic fundamentalists who urge women to obliterate their femininity by wearing the veil. "I fully support the equality of the sexes", she says, "but I also recognize their difference".

In El-Assal's thought and writing, the freedom of the body is deeply linked with the freedom of the mind. The historical confinement of the female body to the home has been, in her view, the main cause of women's intellectual backwardness. "Denied education, social mobility and access to public life, how can women hope to develop their minds, or become artists or scientists?!" she exclaims.In such circumstances, any kind of creative writing becomes difficult, and writing plays becomes well-nigh impossible.

A woman, she explains, can weave novels out of her simple and limited daily experience. Theatre, however, is a communal art and a public forum; it tackles broader issues and requires a public type of discourse, more comprehensive, dialectical, and politically conscious -- in other words, the type of discourse women are rarely trained into. Besides, very few women can write good plays without seeing some first; how else could they learn the craft? In most Arab countries, however, including Egypt, theatre-going is still regarded as an almost exclusively male pastime. If women are allowed to go at all, they seldom choose the play themselves or go without a male relative.

No wonder the number of women fiction-writers far exceeds that of women playwrights. For one thing, writing novels does not involve going out, mixing with actors and directors or staying out late at rehearsals. Besides, fiction is better suited to the housewife's daily pattern. Unlike drama, it does not require long periods of uninterrupted concentration and planning. A novelist can interrupt her writing to answer the door, see to the cooking or the baby without substantial damage. For a dramatist, this could prove disastrous. Serialized drama, however, whether for radio or television, is a different matter, she points out. It is closer to fiction and can afford to ramble and digress.

It is, therefore, a form of writing that women can easily accommodate within their daily routine. " I suppose that is why I wrote so many," she adds.

Now that the children are all grown-up and married, El-Assal plans to devote more time to stage-writing. It would be a pity if she didn't. Her long experience in radio and television have given her a sureness of touch and a degree of technical confidence that other women playwright, with rare exceptions, lack. Her last three plays are more original and experimental in form, and more challenging and daring in their ideas.

The only other woman playwright whose artistic stature matches El-Assal's is Nehad Gad; sadly her promising career was tragically cut short by cancer after only two stage plays. Both are fine specimens of dramatic writing and evidence a great talent – which makes one regret all the more deeply her untimely death in 1989 .

Unlike El-Assal, Miss Gad was a late arrival on the theatrical scene. It took her twenty years to discover the medium best suited to her talent. She was born into an upper middle-class family, the only child of an aging couple. Her father's job as a police commissioner meant frequent moves to new towns, new homes and new schools. Very early on, the little girl discovered that books were the only friends she could carry with her from place to place. By ten, she was a voracious reader, and by twelve, she was writing stories.

Though painful, this lonely childhood brought with it a lot of independence. At 17, Nehad was working as a journalist, writing short stories and children's strip-cartoons, and also reading, first science, then English literature at Cairo University. She made an early, unhappy marriage which lasted only a few years. Shattered by the experience, she left for the States after the divorce. There, two events happened which significantly influenced her later career. She read for an M.A. degree in drama and met her second husband, playwright Samir Sarhan.

For the next ten years she was in close and almost daily contact with the theatrical world. This gave her the valuable first-hand experience of the stage she needed. Armed with both theoretical and practical knowledge of drama, she felt confident enough to embark on her new career as a professional playwright.

Her first play *Adila* was a virtuoso piece for one actress. The late Naima Wasfi undertook the part and Zaynab Shumees directed. The production which opened at the Tali'a theatre in 1981 was indeed an all-woman show – written, designed, directed and performed exclusively by women, This pleased Nehad no end.

The production delighted many and dismayed a few. Those disliked the candid image Nehad projected of the frustrated, materialistic and petty-minded middle-class housewife. She was told that she ought to challenge those traditional images of women by presenting different ones. Nehad would listen calmly to such criticism, then shrug her shoulders innocently and say: "I write about life as I see it around me, not as I think it should be." Among friends she would add: "I think what is wrong with women's writing is that they tend to write themselves into their works and idealize a bit. The result is that their heroines are always good, sensitive, and intellectual. I would like to see some of them in real life. If our patriarchal culture can produce such fine specimens, why challenge it then?!"

In this and her next play *The Bus Stop* (an expanded version of which, renamed *On the Pavement*, became a smash-hit) Nehad insisted on telling the truth, however painful and unflattering. Nothing annoyed her more than when critics regarded her second heroine Safiyya as a symbol of Egypt in the hallowed tradition of the sixties. " I write about real women," she often said, "not about symbols. Safiyya smuggles in a big video machine under her clothes at the airport. I don't think a symbol can do that. Saffiyya is a very ordinary Egyptian middle-class woman who gains awareness at the cost of great suffering. She is shown at the beginning uncritically upholding the bourgeois world-view and value-systems, and blithely free of any intellectual concerns. Her dreams are simply a husband, children, an elegant home and a fat income. The rest of the world can go to hell for all she cares. At the end, however, she realizes that the dreams she was taught to cherish are nothing but traps designed to ensnare unsuspecting female into bondage, humility and exploitation" .

Between *Adila* in' 81 and *on the Pavement* in' 86, Nehad Gad wrote a film-script and called it *Women*. In it, she completely reversed the traditional images of the hero and heroine. She made the hero a negative, idealistic dreamer, and the heroine a positive, down-to-earth realist who sacrifices her moral and professional principles as a lawyer to keep the family going.

After watching the film, I told Nehad jokingly: "If you go on like this, you will soon be called a woman-hater!" She replied:" I am not attacking women. I am simply saying that in societies like ours, many women cannot afford the luxury of ideals. In their daily struggle to ensure the physical survival of the family, they have to be sometimes ruthless and even unscrupulous realists. Most women spend nearly half their lives cooking, cleaning, washing and nursing the sick. I don't see how they can remain romantic!".

El-Assal's and Gad's tolerant view of the male stands in sharp opposition to Nawal El-Sa'dawi's. In her single play *Isis* she goes all out to advocate and affirm the supremacy of the female. The ancient Egyptian goddess here is not a character, but simply a mouthpiece, and a noisy and long-winded one at that. The text is marred by an over abundance of speeches, exhortations and ideological debates.

The central conflict between the authoress, disguised as Isis, and the patriarchal culture embodied in Set is represented in terms of white versus black and is depressingly lacking in dramatic complexity. More disconcertingly, it never seems to move or bring about any real change. It does not even move in circles. One cannot here speak of dramatic action. The characters never seem to do anything but yap at each other. To cover up for the lack of dramatic action, El-Sa'dawi treats us to some gory scenes of physical violence, involving murder, rape, female circumcision and two castrations on stage. As the horror piles up, the whole thing becomes ridiculous and vulgarly sensational.

Isis, published in 1986, was never performed and is, perhaps, unperformable – not on account of its structural faults (worse texts have been performed), but on account of its iconoclastic message and radical views. It is precisely this, however, which makes it very exciting reading. Its dauntless questioning and intellectual audacity remain unparalleled in all the writing by Egyptian women.

Roughly of the same generation as El-Sa'dawi, Fawzia Mahran is blissfully free of that brand of aggressive feminism. Reading her *Cabuchi* after El-Sa'dawi's *Isis* is like hearing Chopin after a raucous concert of jungle music. Indeed, the play itself closely resembles an oratorio. The voices of the characters - a bishop, a nun, a young Palestinian couple and their Israeli torturers - are sensitively orchestrated to render the colour and texture of their emotions. To the external conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis, Mahran

adds a more complex internal one between the peaceful teachings of Christianity and the political necessity of fighting. Both the arch bishop of Jerusalem, who gives the play its name, and the nun Margaret-Martha are embroiled in this conflict, and their doubts, prayers and self-questioning provide some of the most moving scenes in the play.

The stage-sets Mahran suggests in the published text, as well as many of her stage-directions, reveal her sharp awareness of the multiple languages of theatre and the value of light and pure sound. It is a pity, therefore, that the play was never seen in performance. Her other play too, a realistic short piece about the frustrations of a sculptor, was also published in a magazine, and also remains untested on the boards.

The three remaining names on our list of Egyptian women playwrights belong to a younger generation. Nevertheless, all their available work was produced in the eighties, making it the richest decade in women's plays.

Nayla Naguib, a trained actress who retired in the seventies, wrote four plays of which only *Two in Bliss* was seen by the public. The other three are available in print. In the mid eighties, Miss Naguib became engrossed in her career as a professional translator and gave up writing. One play on Scheherezade remains unfinished.

The other two, both poetesses, have so far proved one-timers. Neither Wafa' Wagdi's Lyrical *Nissan and the Seven Doors,* nor Fatma Qandeel's more robust and rebellious *Scheherezade* have any sisters. Miss Wagdi, however, has written a lot of poetry since then and won a state award. Miss Qandeel, on the other hand, seems to have vanished into thin air. After the production of her play at the Youth Theatre, she went home to the provinces and no one has heard from her or about her since. She may have been discouraged by the undeservedly modest success of her play and decided to give up, or she could be married and bringing up a horde of children. Whatever the case, the result is that she has been disturbingly silent for years. Her Scheherazade, however, still speaks to me and tells me how she never consented to marry the misogynist butcher Shahrayar on the one thousand and first night, and how she led a revolution to overthrow him. Her story is good, and I keep wishing for more. But she always says, with a sigh of sorrow, that her creator's voice dissolved into silence before she could teach her another story.

Appendix (II)

Naguib Mahfouz
As Playwright

In spite of his almost single-minded dedication to the art of fiction, Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz has made some forays into the world of drama. In 1969 he published a collection of short stories entitled *Under the Umbrella* which included five one-act plays, his first, namely, with *Death and Resurrection, The Legacy, The Rescue, A Draft Proposal,* and *The Task.* The first three were produced for the stage in the same year by director Ahmad Abdul Halim with a strong cast which included such magnificent actors as Sanaa Gamil, Galal El-Sharqawi, and Aida Abdul Aziz. The combination of Mahfouz's distinguished literary reputation, which had slowly but firmly built up since the forties, and that star-studded cast proved immensely successful with the public; the triple-bill production ran for two months (a substantial run by Egyptian standards in those days) at Al-Hakim Theatre, currently called Mohamed Farid Theatre.

Success with the public, however, does not always guarantee good notices. The critical reception of the production did not match the enthusiasm of the audience, and tended to be rather lukewarm. Indeed, some critics went so far as to dismiss the plays as intellectual exercises or debates in dramatic form (they had done that earlier with

Tawfik El-Hakim), and were amazingly blind to the intrinsic "theatricality" of the pieces which comes across quite vividly even in the reading. One exception was the eminent drama critic Fouad Dawwarah who defended the plays against the charge of being stories in dialogue or dialogic pieces. Was it the classical Arabic of the dialogue, together with the in-built symbolism and ambiguity of the plays which put the critics off at a time when socialist realism was in vogue and the stage went all out for the vernacular, regarding itself primarily as a political forum?* Was it the fault of the director, perhaps? Could it be that he was awed by Mahfouz's reputation, and the classical Arabic, and therefore failed to bring out the essential comical absurdity which underlies the situation in all three plays? Were the actors, possibly, carried away by the classical Arabic, and declaimed in the grand style? I remember seeing Beckett's *Endgame* performed as a tragedy in classical Arabic and, indeed delivered as one at the Pocket Theatre in Cairo in 1962; it was only years later, when I saw it in England, that I discovered it was a hilarious comedy despite the black existential despair! The realistic setting in *The Legacy* and *The Rescue* is very tricky and quite misleading; the familiarity and ordinariness are there only to be exploded. Were they exploded in the production? I was in England at the time, and do not qualify as an eye-witness. I have, therefore, talked to lots of people, and tried to jog their memories. But everyone remembers only the bit that concerns him or her. The actors remember the enthusiastic audience, and will not simply admit that anything was wrong with the production: "the critics were simply pigheaded. You know what critics are like, don't you?" The critics, on the other hand, are either dead or departed or retired, or too self-assured to even question their former judgement. Only one critic, and a dear friend, Samy Khashaba, had the decency and modesty to admit that, perhaps, they were wrong and, possibly, a little bit too niggly at the time.

But whatever the reasons, the critical reception was far from encouraging, and the unfavourable view of Mhafouz as playwright has persisted ever since. I meet students today, in 1988, at the Theatre Institute who tell me, and quite confidently too, that Mahfouz is no play-

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* Some of El-Hakim's classical Arabic plays, however, like *The Sultan's Dilemma* and *O, Tree-Climber* ! and Alfred Farag's Classical Arabic comedies received wide critical acclaim.

wright. I ask, quite innocently, "What have you read?" And the answer is: "It's a well-known fact." I was talking to Samir El-Asfouri the other day, one of our most talented and ingenious directors, and the head of the Avant-garde theatre in Cairo and he told me that he was adapting one of Mahfouz's novels for the stage, the 1985 *The Day the Leader Was Killed.* I asked him, "Why don't you do one of his plays? You're very fond of Ionesco, aren't you?" (He had given us a few years ago a wonderful Ionesco evening entitled *The Bald Primadonna Will Always Remain Bald)* "What about *The Chase*?" I added. But he had not heard of *The Chase*, and "anyway, he is not much of a playwright. He is more dramatic in his novels." When I told him I was doing Mahfouz's eight plays into English, his total dramatic output to date, because (he had exclaimed in total dismay "what for ?!") I happened, apart from all critical jargon, to like them and to think they were superb 'theatre', he said, "you'd better do *A Tale Without Beginning or End.* It is much more dramatic than all his plays. Practically all in dialogue. Besides, it explains quite clearly his attitude to Camp David"; I replied, "Doesn't *Death and Resurrection* do that, even before Camp David?" He said, "Come to think of it, you're right. I had quite forgotten." (Some of Mahfouz's novels were successfully adapted for the stage in the sixties. Is the current tendency a hangover?)

Another friend of mine, director, playwright, and dramaturg, Mahdi al-Hussayni, told me that he had suggested to al-Asfouri Mahfouz's last play *The Devil Turns Preacher or The Copper City,* as it is subtitled – Copper City being the title of the tale in the *Arabian Nights* on which the play was based. El-Asfouri had demurred: "you would need to have a budget of at least fifty thousand," he had finally said, dismissing the idea. A small regional troupe in Upper Egypt is currently rehearsing the play with next to no budget!

Undeterred by critics and producers, Mahfouz went on to write three more one-act plays: *The Chase*, published in the short story collection *Crime* (1973), *The Mountain* and *The Devil Turns Preacher* in a collection of short stories bearing the title of the last play (1979).

The Mountain seems to align itself thematically more with *Death and Resurrection* than either *The Chase* or *The Devil*, presenting itself as a historical hindsight, or, rather, an explanatory, political, prefatory or foot-note to the earlier play.

Death and Resurrection was written in the aftermath of the 1967 war with Israel, referred to sometimes as the 'setback' in the political Jargon of the media. The Giant is a transparent symbol of the U.S.A., or, simply, the Western powers; the aggressive mocker in the wings is an embarrassingly obvious theatrical objectification of Israel, the 'Plague' is a metaphor in the tradition of Camus's *La Peste* of Nasser's dictatorship, with Nasser himself as the ironically doubtful benevolent dictator – the new head of the institution from which the Tiresias-like blind beggar escapes, sacrificing security and comfort for freedom:

Beggar : It so happened that in my wanderings I came across some government officials who led me back to the institution and put me there once more.

Man : They delivered you back to the monster!

Beggar : No. A new head had replaced him. He was honest, just, and kind . . .

Man : How come you left it then ?

Beggar : I bolted.

Man : Incredible.

Beggar : You see, it's true he was honest, fair, and kind, but he was also too damned fond of discipline. Almost an obsession with him. And he enforced it with near astronomical precision, and no questions asked.

Man : But you enjoyed the food, the clothes, the comfort, and the cleanliness.

Beggar : You ate according to schedule, drank according to schedule, went to the toilet, begging your pardon, according to schedule, and slept according to schedule. I nearly went mad.

Man : And so you rebelled once more.

Beggar : Even the luxury of rebelling was denied me, for how could I rebel against an honest, just, and kind man ? My conscience wouldn't let me.

Man : You should have been contented with your lot.

Beggar : Even when revolting was denied me ?

Man : Revolting for its own sake is not particularly a good thing .

Beggar : It's better than being a stone anyway .

Man : And so you ran away.

Beggar : And so I ran away.

Man : To the dust, the insects, and the rotten morsel .

Beggar : To my true happiness.

The Mountain takes us to the beginning of the story, to the roots of all revolutionary dictatorships in the idea or concept of elitism. Five young men set up what amounts to a revolutionary command council in a cave at the top of the Muqattam mountain, complete with a list of the enemies of the people, whom they go about liquidating. The violence is grotesquely portrayed, with a tinge of hysteria and black humour, and the play almost tips, but not quite, into the melodramatic. As such, the two plays constitute one continuous unit, just as *The Legacy* and *The Rescue*, with their anonymous Man and Woman, and realistic form another.

The Legacy revolves round a theme, or, rather, a two-fold dialectic that has obsessed Mahafouz throughout his career, namely the conflict between religion and scientific progress, on the one hand, and the past and the future, on the other. The story of the prodigal son is here ironically inverted and rather than the fatted calf he gets a 'fatted' contractor and business man, and a detective, Ionesco-style. The 'Wali', or holy man, exits carrying a huge question mark (a miracle-worker? A charlatan?), and the old house, the inheritance, or the cultural and religious heritage symbolically, is replaced by a factory of electronic equipment.

Mystery and suspense equally underlie the construction of *The Rescue,* a play that ironically contradicts its very title. It begins with one big question - who is the woman, and what has she done to send the state security after her in such force? - and ends with the same question having grown bigger and hatched several other questions. The grotesque mixture of obscenity, violence, black despair and comedy occurs once more in this play as in *The Legacy,* with sex as an added bonus. Ambiguity, however, remains the structuring principle, so that the more we seem to discover about the two principal characters, and the more intimately we get to know them, the more vex-

ingly mysterious they become. When death comes at the end, the absurdity, or senseless futility, is quite intolerable, and heroism explodes with a hollow bang which is grotesquely funny.

In all four plays and indeed, in all his plays, Mahfouz does not stick to one dramatic style, but opts, rather, for artistic eclecticism. *Death and Resurrection* is allegorical and expressionistic in its general character, a parable where the symbolism thins out in places almost to a fault. However, it makes use of other styles, suggesting Ionesco and Camus in the episodes of the Doctor and the blind Beggar, ending in a manner typical of the Agitprop theatre, and opening with the hero flung backward on stage from one of the wings in the exact manner of Beckett's hero in *Act Without WordsI*.

The Legacy and *The Rescue* are almost realistic T.V. thrillers with a strong dose of the absurd and the incomprehensible in the Pinteresque tradition. *The Mountain* has an element of harrowing violence engendered not only by the brutal murders, but also by the ruthless brevity of the scenes and their breathlessly quick pace and relentless succession. This pattern imparts to the quasi -- realistic setting an oppressively sinister and claustrophobic atmosphere, transforming the scathing critique of moral and political elitism into an existential hell in the mode of Sartre.

The other plays are equally varied and eclectic. *The Chase* is almost a purely absurdist drama with unmistakable overtones from Ionesco's *The Killer,* and faint echoes from the same writer's *Jacques* and *The Future is in Eggs. The Copper City, or The Devil Turns Preacher,* is a panoramic historical fantasia with a parabolic element and with time as the chief protagonist, as it was in *The Chase*. It would require, in my view, a method of production close to Vakhtangov's concept of 'fantastic reality'. *The Task* begins in the realistic vein of a thriller, with a chase and another mysterious pursuer, and switches to pure expressionism halfway as the relentless pursuer begins to cast a sinister shadow reminiscent, once more, of Ionesco's 'Killer'. *A Draft Proposal,* on the other hand, is realistic from beginning to end, with elements of farce (the slapstick fight scene) and melodrama (the pining, unrequieted love element). It is a strong dramatic invective in the burlesque tradition against the commercialism of the modern theatre and its star-system.

It is a well-known fact that Mahfouz is widely read in world, and, particularly, Western fiction - Proust, Joyce, Dickens, Balzac, Zola, Hardy, you name it. What his plays reveal is that he must have read equally deeply into world drama, and especially modern drama. But apart from the question of readings and influences which needs to be separately and methodically studied and documented, the plays reveal a lively dramatic mind, a rich visual and auditory imagination, a keen sense of the special nature of dramatic writing, and a deep awareness of the resources of the stage. Setting, movement, visual and sound effects play an important part in shaping the situation, the dramatic action and significance of those plays, and work hand with the dialogue, or the spoken word. Indeed, only a confident and daring playwright could have taken the traditional 'blackout' and put it to such effective theatrical use. In *The Legacy,* a whole sequence is conducted in total darkness with only the voices of the two actors, interspersed with silences, the sound of whimpering, and two screams at work. It is as though Mahfouz was drawing on the resources of radio drama to communicate to the audience the atmosphere of the ancient haunted house, and the woman's terror and anxiety.

The dialogue itself, though in the neutrally remote classical Arabic - a deliberate ruse to distance the dramatic situation from everyday reality and its humdrum patterns and familiar types - is invariably shot through with flashes of wit and comedy, and preppered over with colloquial images and expressions. The result is a crisp dramatic dialogue, vivid, economical, and fast-moving. Indeed, in several instances, Mahfouz ingeniously manipulates classical Arabic to give the sound, intonation, rhythm, and effect of the vernacular, i.e. of everyday speech, while preserving its formal character. Professor M. Enani has written an informative analytical study of this point in an essay on the development of the language of fiction in Egypt entitled 'Novel Rhetoric'. It will be published shortly by the *Egyptian Book Organization* in a book on Mahfouz called *Egyptian Perspectives,* and I strongly recommend it to anyone interested in the subject. In the present limited context, however, one or two examples from *The Legacy* will suffice to illustrate the point. Listen to the Detective blackmailing the Man with two questions that depend wholly for their meaning on the colloquial intonation, since they include neither verbs nor interrogative articles:

Detective : And the case and its costs ? ... And the money going into custody and possibly getting lost?

A line later we find the Detective repeating the same structure, only with fewer words; his line literally translates :

Detective: Lawyers' fees ? Financial liabilities ? Your imprisonment ?

However, neither the crispness of the dialogue with its occasional flashes of humour, nor the hilarious oddness of some of the incidents and characters -- a harlot and a pimp in the house of a holy man in *The Legacy;* a runaway woman in the flat of a strange bachelor in *The Rescue;* a giant, an insolent beggar and a crazy doctor in *Death and Resurrection;* a dirty old man seeking orgies and getting cudgeled to death in *The Mountain;* a sinister voyeur or 'Peeping Tom' in *The Task;* a woman accepting bigamy to help Mr. Red and Mr. White elude their pursuer in *The Chase;* a spell-bound city, thousands of years old, with an evil sleeping beauty for a queen, a bottled 'efreet' or 'Jinni' at the bottom of a lake, and a trip reminiscent of the one in *Time-Machine* in *The Devil Turns Preacher;* and a pompous critic and an insipid interviewer in *A Draft Proposal* - neither the oddness nor the humour succeeds in dispelling the air of sinister gloom which envelops the plays. The sense of absurdity which Albert Camus so eloquently described lies, in various degrees, at the heart of existence as they portray it. *in The Myth of Sisyphus*, in Justin O'Brien's translation (New York, Knopf, 1955), Camus says:

"A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. The divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity."

The world of *The Legacy, The Rescue, The Task,* and *The Chase* or *The Mountain*, perhaps to a lesser degree, is riddled with mystery, and cannot be explained realistically and rationally by either good or bad reasons; it raises question which are never answered, expectations which are never fulfilled, leaving us in the end with characters who are only identifiable and definable by their anguish, despair and utter perplexity. And even in *Death and Resurrection*, which is obviously

militant, *The Devil Turns Preacher*, which is cautionary (a warning against Sadat's incipient autocracy) and *A Draft Proposal*, one glimpses behind the direct political implications and the hero's defiant fiery rhetoric in the first, in the treatment of time, and lost chances in the second, and in the author's proposed unheroic play in the last, traces of this existential sadness and sense of futility. For in these plays Mahfouz was dramatizing not only his own persistent dilemmas and preoccupations, but the consciousness of a whole people, the emotional and intellectual turmoil of a period of national crisis when the Nasser myth exploded, and the Egyptian dream lay in ruins. After the defeat, there came the trials, with their shattering revelations: the idols fell, one after the other; the past was a fraud, and the future, with the idols all fallen, and Israel nearer Cairo than ever, held very little promise indeed. The plays, if they are anything at all, are a symbolic rendition in dramatic terms of the frustration, the dazed bewilderment, the sense of shock and collapse, of a paradise lost, which marked the consciousness of this period. In those black days, 'divested of illusions and lights,' every Egyptian, whatever his class, or walk of life, felt an alien, a stranger, a redundant actor divorced from his setting. Neither self nor history made sense. Our exile seemed, at the time, quite 'without remedy.'

In his novels, Mahfouz has immortalized a city, Cairo, and documented the development of the consciousness of a whole nation. In his plays too, he acts as the chronicler of consciousness.

Appendix (III)

All the World's a Stage

In memory of Idris

"If we want a real Egyptian theatre, we should look for it in the streets, in the fairground, the popular shows and the complex ceremonies and rituals of birth, death and circumcision."

With these memorable words, Youssef Idris launched his campaign for a genuine Egyptian theatre in 1964, and with it his personal quest for an identity as playwright. He was already a distinguished literary figure at the time, and the most prominent short story writer in the Arab world. He had also made his mark in the realm of drama and had three successful and critically acclaimed plays to his credit. Another writer would have rested happily on his laurels and continued to mine the same lucrative vein. Idris, however, was made of different stuff – the stuff of great explorers and reckless adventurers. In a BBC interview, recently re-broadcast, he admitted that whatever he did was motivated by a fever-pitch quest for originality.

To be different, however, was not the only desire which prompted Idris to break with his dramatic past and seek new directions. He was deeply dissatisfied with the form in which he worked. Increasingly he came to realise that the constraints of the realistic formula he had in-

herited from the pioneers of Egyptian literary drama, like No'man Ashour and Sa'd El-Din Wahba, were paralysing. Like Ionesco, he felt that the boxed stage where the actors pretended the audience did not exist, and the audience was reduced to the humiliating status of a peeping Tom, was both embarrassing and artificial. What is more it was alien and inimical to the Egyptian temperament, which is intrinsically gregarious and tends to regard even the most private of experiences as communal property.

A brief look at the three plays he produced before 1964 clearly reveals the formal tensions of his struggle with the realistic well-made play. His first play *The King of Cotton* (produced in 1956 and directed by Nabil El-Alfi) is painfully static: the conflict between the farm-worker Qamhawi (literally the corn-man) and Sunbati, the landowner, does not grow or develop in any sense; it is bogged down in a clutter of superfluous details seemingly intended to achieve verisimilitude.

Embarrassingly, a hackneyed love story between the farm worker's son and the landowner's daughter is squeezed in to provide the play with romantic interest and perhaps infuse some life and zest into the dull proceedings. In scene after scene we are bludgeoned with boring evidences of the injustice of feudalism; when you consider that the play was performed in the heyday of socialism in Egypt, it might seem that Idris was preaching to the converted. Not surprisingly, the play ends abruptly with a raging fire that consumes the bales of white gold, as if the good Lord himself or some *deus ex machina* had interfered to put a stop to the aimless wanderings of a misguided text.

Like all great artists, Youssef Idris was incapable of simplification and exclusion, and despite a scientific training in medicine his wayward imagination sought truth in the nooks and crannies of the human mind rather than in the straight and narrow paths of deductive logic. For him, reality consisted not the conscious acts and decisions we daily and calculatingly perform and take, but in the collective consciousness and the mysterious regions of dreams, folk memories and fantasy. In his second play, *Republic of Farahat*, or *Utopia*, he strayed into those regions, creating a stirring work which, despite its stiflingly traditional realistic formula, hung precariously and provocatively midway between reality and dream, partaking of both and belonging to neither. PC Farahat, in his lonely police station, faced with a young political prisoner and going through the barbarous investigation rou-

tines, is fitfully assailed by glimpses of Utopia. The gruelling contrast between what he gruffly says and horribly does, and the urbane civility of his milk and honey dreams testifies to deep-seated schizophrenia. Idris was to return much later to the dungeons of the soul and its winding alleyways.

For some mysterious reason, however, Idris reverted to realism with a vengeance four years later, as if quailing at the prospect of what Farahat might lead to. In *The Critical Moment* (1960) the mental split and ailing soul ware there, but heavily disguised. Once more a deep sense of embarrassment bedevilled the audience. The young hero, 'Sa'd' (literally, good luck), is the hope of a humble middle class family. When he volunteers to fight the aggressors in the Canal, during the 1956 tripartite attack on Egypt, his father manages, it seems, to lock him up in his room. But we discover at the end that the door was open all the time, if Sa'd had cared to test it. But maybe he was happy to think it was locked. After all, who could blame him? Idris always maintained that the key to the Egyptian character was coercion! Having experienced alienation in one's own homeland over centuries at the hands of foreign rulers, who would blame a young man for feeling he did not belong and valuing his own safety over that of his country? Indeed, Idris's last play, *The Acrobat*, echoes a similar sentiment when one of the major characters says: "They all talk about Egypt, Our Mother! Who is this Egypt, I'd like to know? Where is she?! Egypt should be my dignity. A cool drink on a hot summer's day. A home. Respect."

Respect is what all Idris's characters desperately pursue, and rarely find. "To live in Egypt, you have to be an acrobat; and inside each one of us intellectuals there is a little tightrope-dancer lurking somewhere." Those were his very words. And whether an acrobatic and clownish intellectual could respect himself and believe in what he says, let alone convince others of its veracity was quite a riddle! Idris managed it though, by completely relinquishing the realistic pretence on the stage in favour of open, undisguised theatricality, while, at the same time, frankly acknowledging the intrinsic element of play-acting which enters into all our dealings and social practices. At last, the intellectual could walk the stage as clown or acrobat to discuss the nature of the social and existential game imposed upon him, as man and

social being, and try to dismantle it or, at least, discredit it for an evening in the eyes of his companions.

Idris also renounced the traditional box-stage and closed theatre, opting for a form of theatre-in-the-round, with a free, more fluid form of seating. Like the street juggler, the circus clown, or the old storyteller, the actor would be ringed round on all sides by his audience, or, rather, "co-players".

Idris worked out his ideas in three successive articles, published 1964 in *El-Migalah* magazine under the title "Towards an Egyptian Theatre". But knowing that the proof of the pudding was in the eating, he proceeded a few months later to put his ideas into practice. *El-Farafeer*, (the underlings) was the result, a daring experiment that has since inspired literally hundreds of similar experiments.

Masters and servants was the theme, and Idris examined it from a variety of angles, expanding the metaphor so that by the end it is made to embrace even man's relation to fate and history. Equally cunning was the form he chose; it looks deceptively loose with a series of farcical and improvisational sketches, following each other in seemingly haphazard order. The pieces, however, soon form an intricate pattern and are tightly harnessed together by the central metaphor of all the world as a stage. The author-director is God or fate, who is frequently absent, and gradually diminishes until he appears at the end as a baby. Farfoor, the prototype of man and of the down-trodden Egyptian, is a professional clown who strays into the theatre by accident and is persuaded and finally coerced into playing the role of servant to the end of time. The master, on the other hand, is a member of the audience who is picked out randomly to play the part, and doggedly sticks to it throughout. As the play develops, he comes to embody both the blind force of history and all irrational social systems. In the final analysis, however, both master and servant are victims of the absent author and prisoners in his infernal script. What starts as a game ends as a tragic farce in the manner of Beckett. Indeed, the shadows of Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon and his absent Godot are never very far from Farfoor, his master and their absent author.

Looking back at *The Underlings* after nearly 25 years, what strikes one most is not its enduring freshness and appeal, or its specific 'Egyptianness', but rather its universality.

It is as if by digging deep into the history of Egyptian popular entertainment and social rituals, Idris has managed, perhaps unconsciously, to tap the vital resources of other folk traditions and ancient theatrical practices. No wonder the play carries strong reminders of the *commedia dell' arte*, and Farfoor bears a close *resemblance* to the crafty servant of Roman comedy, to the 'Vice' and 'Everyman' of the middle ages, and the wise Shakespearean fool and the Italian harlequin.

Curiously, in view of its popularity, Idris did not repeat this experiment until about 20 years later. Maybe he was sickened by the glut of imitative plays this experiment spawned, and maybe his restless search for originality and innovation would not let him do the same thing twice. A pity, since his next two experiments fall short of the aims he set for himself.

World Farce is daringly ambitious but deeply muddled. Idris hoped to bring to the stage the mental, psychological and political preoccupations of his day, and pen down a dramatic chronicle of an age of social and intellectual turbulence and topsy-turvy values. Inspired by Elmer Rice's *Adding Machine*, he chose an expressionistic form and set his play in a psychiatric surgery guarded over by a male nurse called 'Sifr', after Rice's Mr Zero. As the patients file in, all with the same name but different numbers, the play takes off into the world of fantasy. Everything takes place inside the head of the psychiatrist, we later discover, and the patients are all projections of his feverish mind. What the play is about after that is anybody's guess. Unlike *The Underlings*, the pattern here, if there is one, is terribly opaque and fragmented. You glimpse it in flashes, but it soon dissolves in the clutter of ideas and eddying pools of turgid dialogue. What the play needs is a director to tidy it up as Karam Mutawi had earlier tidied up *El-Farfafeer*, ruthlessly cutting a whole act, which Idris later developed into *World Farce*!

After an interval of three years, there followed *El-Mukhatateen* (which means at the same time "The Conspirators" and "The Ones in Striped Uniforms"). A straightforward saucy political satire in the expressionistic vein, it was at once less muddled and far poorer than the previous play. It did however incense the government of the day and was banned from public performance until 1983 when, despite its political reputation, it had only a modest success.

This production of *El-Mukhatateen* did, however, yield one bonus. It encouraged Idris to venture once more into the realm of drama. The result was *The Acrobat* in which he recovered something of the vivacious spirit of *El-Farafeer*, its daring innovativeness and theatrical zest. The central unifying metaphor this time was not the stage but the circus, and he intended the play to be performed in a real circus tent with real clowns. The hero is a journalist and, secretly, a part-time circus acrobat and clown. He embodies in a vivid and bitter theatrical metaphor Idris' own history of dealing with the political establishment since the forties. No wonder the hero opts out of the 'balancing' game at the end and casts off all his compromising social masks to recover his real human face. But the face turns out, paradoxically, to be the theatrical mask of the clown!

Watching the play (which unfortunately was performed at the National Theatre in 1988 and not at the National Circus as the author desired) one could not help thinking that this schizophrenic and acrobatic intellectual of the eighties was the natural heir and perhaps inevitable progeny of the oppressed intellectual clown of the sixties. One wonders if more clowns would have followed! Sadly, however, Idris, like his last hero, has departed the grand circus of life.

Appendix (IV)

Poetry on the stage

1- The plays of Salah Abdul Saboor

Although he died nearly five years ago, Salah Abdul Saboor remains Egypt's most prominent and influential contemporary poet, not only because he has created a new poetic idiom, and fashioned a new sensibility which few poets have as yet been able to escape or convincingly go beyond, but also on account of the leading role he played in re-establishing Arabic poetic drama as a viable theatrical proposition on the modern Egyptian stage after it had nearly completely disappeared under the tide of experimental and realistic prose drama (1).

The movement towards the rejuvenation of Arabic poetry, which eventually led to a revival of verse drama, began in 1957 when Abdul Saboor published his first collection *People of My Country*. This collection, as S. Sarhan rightly remarks, "marked a break with the rigid verse forms of classical Arabic poetry;" (2) and, indeed, without this break it would have been impossible for Abdul-Saboor to embark on his dramatic career, seven years later, with his great full-length verse play *The Tragedy of El-Hallaj* (1964).

The new verse form which Abdul-Saboor championed and helped, with a few other Arab pioneers, to hew and refine was ideally suited for dramatic expression. It allowed for changes in the number

of feet in each verse line; for a change in metre from one line to another, and, more importantly, it freed itself from the shackles of rhyme which in drama would give human speech an artificial proverbial neatness similar to the effect produced by the heroic couplet in 18th century English heroic tragedy, and impede the flow of meaning from one line to another, thus interfering with the inner rhythm of the dramatic mood. Just as Elizabethan drama would have been impossible without blank verse, modern Arabic verse drama would never have got off the ground without the efforts of the "new verse movement' (3).

Having fought and won his battle for a freer and more pliable verse form to work within, a battle which reached its fiercest stages in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Abdul-Saboor concentrated all his creative efforts on introducing into the Arabic poem the concept of organic unity, thus completely transforming the face of Arabic poetry, at least in Egypt. The typical classical poem, in most cases, depended for its sense of unity on primarily external qualities, i.e., unity of rhyme and metre; the more subtle issue of inner imaginative cohesion, which the modern reader has come to demand and insist upon, was completely subject to chance. So long as the poet adhered to the rules and fulfilled the requirements of the rigid external form, he could be as rambling and formless as he liked without being taken to task.

Abdul-Saboor rejected this mode of poetic expression which reduced poetic utterance to a form of eloquent public speaking, forceful, and effective, perhaps, but very far removed from the intensity, the taut interrelatedness and internal coherence of the poetic experience as he understood it after he had come under the influence of Shakespeare, Eliot, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Lorca and Brecht, among others.

Abdul-Saboor was easily the most well-read and best informed contemporary Arab poet; he read deeply into literature, history, philosophy, and religion, both eastern and western. And though he assimilated a great deal of western thought and philosophy, he never lost sight of his old Arabic heritage or sought to dissociate himself from it. In his bold and exciting book *A New Reading of Ancient Arabic Poetry,* he looks at this heritage critically and sifts it to find out the elements and portions that could still relate to the modern Arab man's experience, and to define the voices that could still address his consciousness effectively. This book focuses Abdul Saboor's con-

scious effort throughout his creative career to establish a fruitful dialectic between the past and the present, the inherited eastern sensibility and the acquired western one, both on the levels of historical and artistic experience. And it is this dialectical relationship that gives his poetry its striking dramatic quality (4).

Indeed, it was inevitable that Abdul Saboor's dramatic poetry should eventually lead him to drama, for the man's mind was essentially dramatic; it viewed existence and human experience in terms of a conflict in which the violent antitheses of past and present; word and deed; thought and action; myth and history; body and soul; abstract and concrete; idealism and materialism; sexual passion and religious ardour; the relative and the temporal and the eternal; the absolute; tragedy and comedy; Plato and Marx; Aristotle and the Moslem mystics; interlocked and interacted. In a valuable study of Abdul Saboor's poetry, entitled "The Lover of Wisdom and the Sage of Love", Izz El-Din Isma'il has emphasized the antithetical quality of the poet's mind and the dialectical quality of his poetry. Isma'il perceptively argues that Abdul Saboor's poetry merges in one paradoxical synthesis the experiences of Faust and Don Juan to create a prototype of modern man (5). One should add to Faust and Don Juan, however, Christ, as the concrete metaphor of the synthesis, and Hamlet, as its emotional dimension of existential human suffering and perplexity.

Abdul Saboor produced five plays in all (6); *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj* (1964), rendered into English as *Murder in Baghdad; Night Traveller* and *A Princess Waiting* (1969), two one-act plays; *Laila and the Madman (Al-Majnoon)* (1970); and finally, *Now The King is Dead,* literally, *After the King is Dead* (1971)(6) Read together, in chronological order, the plays represent an intense imaginative quest in the realm of art for philosophical repose and harmony; they vividly trace the agonizing, arduous path the poet travelled towards the final synthesis he tentatively reached and precariously held in his last play.

In an interesting article entitled "Salah Abdul Saboor's Theatre: Meaning and Structure", M.S. Farid stresses the universal quality of Abdul Saboor's theatre and declares that in terms of themes and dramatic conventions it firmly belongs in the mainstream of modern drama (8). And, indeed, if one remembers how *Shakespeare's Hamlet* and Eliot's *Becket* constantly hover around Abdul Saboor's *Al-Hallaj*, how

A Princess Waiting strongly evokes the theatre of Maeterlinck and the symbolists, and *Night Traveller* the drama of Ionesco, and how *Now the King is Dead* brings to mind at once Shakespeare and Brecht, Ionesco's *Exit the King,* Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Pirandello's theatre within the theatre-, one can hardly deny the justice of Farid's remark.

Paradoxically, however, in spite of, or, rather, besides, this palpable Western, or, rather, universal quality, Abdul-Saboor's theatre has an unmistakable national flavour and is deeply steeped in Arabic history, myth and folklore. Moreover, it is, in one respect, an eminently political, topical theatre, i.e., the authentic product of a particular historical moment in the life of a nation, projecting all its conflicts, dilemmas, and urgent concerns. In fact the key to Abdul-Saboor's dramatic genius lies in his ability to extend and enrich the significance of local events and urgent topical issues, transmuting them through myth, folklore and fantasy into universal themes of enduring human interest. To illustrate how this fusion of the imported and the home-grown occurs, how the antithesis of eastern heritage and western influence is resolved into an original dramatic synthesis both in terms of theme and pattern, or form and content, we shall briefly examine the plays.

The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj revolves round the revolt and martyrdom of the mystic-rebel Al-Hussein Bin Al-Mansour in Baghdad in the year 309 H. (c.930 A.D.) Al-Hallaj was at once a mystic, a poet, and a social reformer, and when he was tried and executed, it was not certain whether his charge was heresy or political agitation. Understandably, in view of his 'socialist' leanings, his urgent sense of poetic vocation, and his deeply-ingrained mysticism (9), Abdul Saboor found in this historical figure an apt vehicle to project his own dilemma as an intellectual torn between the overpowering urge to dedicate himself completely to the nurturing of his creative energy, and the demands of his social conscience that push him in the direction of political involvement and action.The conflict crystallized as one between thought and action, and, at this point, the dilemma of the historical Hallaj, the poetical persona of Abdul Saboor, unconsciously merged, in the crucible of the imagination, with Hamlet's dilemma. 'O, cursed spite, that I was ever born to set it right' became Abdul Saboor's, and his hero's, urgent and agonizing cry, as well as Hamlet's. In other words, Shakespeare's hero, with all his rich and ambiguous associations, became

the medium that transmuted the particular historical Arab figure, and particular Egyptian poet's dilemma, into a universal theme. And the thematic transformation naturally and inevitably produced a technical transformation.

Abdul Saboor consciously fashioned his play along the lines of Aristotelian tragedy (10). *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj*, however, offers a new formula which is not strictly Aristotelian. In his stimulating article "Tragedy and Symbolism in *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj* and *Laila and the Madman*", Samy Khashaba convincingly argues that in Al-Hallaj, Abdul Saboor works out an original concept of tragedy which is distinctly different from the original Aristotelian concept and its later reformulations by Hegel and Nietzsche, on the one hand, and on the other, from Ferdinand Brunetiere's modern concept which he bases on the ideas of the enlightenment about man's freedom and his ability to decide his own destiny (11). The opposition of the individual's will to the will of fate, and the inevitable eventual triumph of fate which underlies the classical concept of tragedy was rejected by Abdul Saboor, and so was the metaphysical void in which Brunetiere's theory of tragedy placed the individual's free will. Both were rejected in favour of a concept of tragedy that harmonizes with the philosophical vision of the relation of man to God, of individual to divine will, inherent in Oriental Christianity and Islam, and with the national culture and psychological make-up. According to this concept, man, in seeking to determine his fate freely, is ultimately realizing the will of God who has created him in his own image. One cannot help noting here the basically romantic and optimistic nature of this concept (and, indeed, Islam has often been described as an essentially romantic and optimistic faith, a faith, too, that regards social action as a kind of worship and a means of spiritual fulfilment). Abdul Saboor's new kind of tragedy championed the individual without severing his links with the Divine authority; for whereas in classical tragedy the individual stood in opposition to the divine powers and their temporal reflection in the moral-social-political system that governed men's lives, in Abdul Saboor's type of tragedy, the individual is aligned to God against the temporal system which is depicted as obstructing the fulfilment of the Divine will.

The Aristotelian hero's typical *Hamartia* is transformed in this new concept of tragedy into a positive heroic action which is in-

dividually chosen against what, on the surface, appears to be the will of God, but is later revealed to be in harmony with it and only against the will of a misguided or corrupt temporal authority. And though the temporal authority finally succeeds in destroying the hero, the tragic end (death, which in *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj*, significantly takes the form of a crucifixion) becomes, paradoxically, a fulfilment and a triumph for the hero and a confirmation of the divine will, while the triumph of the temporal authority in destroying the rebel hero is defined as a crime in the eyes of God and a breach of faith. In this way, the secular and religious planes merge, and the tragic hero becomes a social reformer and a prophet, at once a political revolutionary, and an emissary of fate. And since Al-Hallaj is in one aspect a poet, as most of Abdul Saboor's later heroes (or personas), one suspects that Abdul Saboor was reverting to the pre-Aristotelian idea of the poet as prophet and a leader who guides men through divine inspiration – an idea passionately advocated and given its social dimensions by Shelley whom Abdul Saboor greatly admired.

For Abdul Saboor, the prototype of this positive tragic hero was Christ, the physical embodiment of the divine word, and the material symbol of the marriage of heaven and earth. In *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj*, Abdul Saboor takes pains to stress the humanity of Christ (to whom his hero is explicitly compared) rather than his divinity, by giving his Christ-hero a moving Hamletian dimension: He uses Hamlet's sense of uncertainty, bewilderment and loss to focus on the human agony of Christ's last cry on the cross, 'O, God! Why hast thou forsaken me?'- a cry that the Hallaj does not actually utter, but which is clearly implied in his manner of death.

The image of Christ as the resolution of all paradoxes and antitheses haunted Abdul Saboor's mind. The Saviour appears in his poetry as poet, social leader, political rebel, and tormented man. He embodied for Abdul Saboor Byron's man, half-dust and half-deity, Hamlet's paradoxical creature – 'what a piece of work is man!', and Eliot's Prufrock and Fisher King. And just as Eliot mixed Indian and Christian mythology in his *Waste Land*, Abdul Saboor, who was interested in Indian culture and spent some time in India, was able to relate the Christian myth to the fertility rites of the pagan religions of the Eastern valleys in the manner of Byron (12). The full implications of

this fusion, however, did not completely materialize until much later in *Now The King is Dead*.

After *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj*, Abdul Saboor embarked on two new dramatic experiments which reveal his keen interest in modern dramatic techniques and forms. *Night Traveller*, a one-act play, was consciously written in the tradition of the theatre of the absurd, as Abdul Saboor himself admitted (he never made a secret of his admiration for Ionesco in particular), and has been critically discussed and evaluated in this light (13). That the play draws consciously on the methods and techniques of absurdist drama is quite apparent. What has escaped attention, however, is the fact that Abdul Saboor offers in it his own version of the absurd in the same manner in which he offered in *Al-Hallaj* his own concept of tragedy. Typically, and ingeniously, Abdul Saboor uses his own feelings about the Egyptian current historical moment as a starting point for reflecting on man's relation to history in general. He portrays history here as mechanical, oppressive process which senselessly grinds on (like a night-train without a destination). Into this process, man is helplessly caught (like the passenger who is trapped in the nigh-train) and loses his divine spark, his human identity, and finally his very existence.

Humanity in the play is represented by the poor night traveller, a colourless commuter, a typical product of modern civilization like Eliot's typist in *The Waste Land*, who symbolically drops and loses his rosary at the beginning of the play, and with it all his spiritual powers of resistance. Like a typical modern city commuter, he takes out some reading matter to while away the dreary hours of the night journey, and the "parchment he takes out from his coat wherein history has been recorded in a mere ten lines", with its "black embossed letters" (14), or headlines, is the equivalent of the modern newspaper – Abdul Saboor's symbol of the falsification and dehumanization of history.

The spiritual void created by the loss of the rosary, the symbol of religious faith and the spiritual dimension of existence, is soon filled with the august shadows of past and present political despots: Alexander, Hannibal, Tamerlane, Hitler, and Lyndon Johnson. The shadows suddenly merge into each other and materialize in the figure of the conductor, the leader of the nightmarish train of history, who confuses and torments the passenger, accuses him of having killed God

and stolen his identity card, deprives him of his right to exist on the train or know his destination by swallowing his ticket, and finally kills him in a manner strongly reminiscent of the closing scene of Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages*.

The conductor, who quotes Nietzsche's famous "God is dead" to the passenger, is the embodiment of Nietzsche's superman, the history-maker, the naked "will to power" and of his idea of history as "eternal recurrence" without moral purpose or hope for improvement. By identifying Nietzsche' superman with political dictatorship and oppression, past and present, Abdul Saboor was offering a critique of Niezsche's view of history rather than endorsing it, as some critics have argued. Salah Abdul Saboor admits in *My Life in Poetry* the deep and lasting impression Nietzsche made on his mind (15). However, the romantic socialist in him stood in violent opposition to the pessimistic existentialist. And it is this opposition (which comes across clearly in the form of scathing irony) that gives the play its vitality and the dialectical quality which distinguishes it from other absurdist dramas.

In absurdist drama an annihilating sense of futility and inescapable oppression predominates; it forms an intrinsic aspect of the human condition. No human action, no amount of faith or social change can alter what is presented as an ineluctable mode, a vicious circle. The forces of oppression, Sartre's inimical nothingness, are amoral and beyond the reach of human action. In *Night Traveller,* however, no matter how much it draws on the style of the theatre of the absurd, the oppression of the historical process, since it is strongly related to a particular, and, therefore, transient moment in the political history of a nation, never strikes us an unalterable condition of existence. Abdul Saboor's purpose in enacting in his drama Nietzsche's concept of history is not to enforce and confirm it, but rather to expose the foolishness and guilt of the people who believe it, acquiesce in it, and use it as an excuse for inaction, leaving their oppressors to make use of it to foster and exercise their will to power. This message, which indirectly advocates social action, contrary to the message of absurdist drama, is embodied in the narrator-commentator, or chorus – a technical feature quite foreign to absurdist drama and more in line with Brecht's thought and dramatic practice. After *Night Traveller,* Brecht's influence is more and more discernible in Abdul Saboor's

theatre and is joined by an attempt to break the Nietzschean vicious circle of history by stressing the vital procreative powers of man and his creative energy both on the spiritual and sexual levels.

Politics and sex are the two dominant themes in Abdul-Saboor's next one-acter *A Princess Waiting;* oriental myth and folklore provide its framework; and Maeterlinck's symbolist theatre supplies its technical procedure. Abdul Saboor based the play on an old Arab tale which tells of a princess who fell in love with an invader of her country and helped him get through its fortifications thus betraying the king, her father. The invader could not trust her since she had betrayed her father; so when he establishes himself as ruler of her country, he kills her (16).

Besides this old tale, Abdul-Saboor uses other elements of near eastern folklore, primarily the "lamentation rituals" which involve a symbolic re-enactment of the past guilty event that provokes the remorseful lamentation. This old folk ritual is presented in the manner of a play-within-the–play, thus suggesting Pirandello to the mind steeped in western drama. Three women open the play with preparations for the ritualistic re-enactment of the Princess's betrayal of her father and her eventual betrayal and exile by her lover. The princess believes that by reliving her painful past she could expiate her guilt and recover the favours of her lover. But when her lover, Al-Samandal, does arrive, she discovers that he wants to use her once more as a tool or a weapon in his political game of power: he needs her to confer legitimacy on his rule, as daughter of the late king. But Al-Samandal does not gain his end; for the conscience of the princess, or, rather, the consciousness of the nation, embodied in the figure of the vagabond, itenerant poet, as his name Al-Quarandal suggests, interferes to stop her being deceived once more, and to reveal to her the truth of her identity.

Despite the quasi-Pirandellian opening, the play proceeds in a symbolic manner. Through her interaction with her women, her lover, and the poet, the princess grows into an ambiguous, rich symbol suggesting at once Egypt (17) (on the immediate topical-political level), mother nature and the life force, and the mother of the Saviour. As the three levels merge, the play acquires its individual identity as a national-universal artistic product. And here we begin to detect the seeds of that individual, almost pagan ethic which Abdul Saboor was un-

consciously developing – an ethic that regards vitality, the creative and recreative energies of man, physically, intellectually, and spiritually, as the "primary good". We also detect here the beginnings of the poet's transformation of Christ (the child the princess/Virgin Mary was promised but never had because she sought to unite herself to the barren political-historical rather than the fruitful spiritual-divine authority) into an oriental pagan fertility god. In this play too, Abdul Saboor introduces the poet for the first time as one of the *dramatis personae* and invests him with a role he is later to develop to its full significance in *Now the King is Dead*, where the poet is almost identified with the Holy Ghost.

After these two plays, which definitely come under the umbrella of the modern political and experimental theatre, Abdul Saboor reverted to tragedy, but in a new and exciting fashion. If Eliot's dramatic procedure in *Murder in the Cathedral* had helped to inspire *Al-Hallaj*, then Eliot's attempt at realistic tragedy in *The Family Reunion* or *The Cocktail Party*, particularly the former, must have helped to inspire Abdul Saboor's experiment in the realistic poetic tragedy of *Laila and theMadman*. Eliot had established a textual interrelationship between his own text and Aeschylus's trilogy, and introduced Orestes and his furies into a contemporary family setting. Abdul Saboor introduced Ahmad Sahawqi's classical/romantic lover, Qais, or the "Majnoon", and Laila into the setting of a modern newspaper in the Cairo of the 1950s.

As in *A Princess Waiting*, the author resorts once more to the Pirandellian, or, rather, Elizabethan, play within the play: the staff of the newspaper which includes a poet-journalist, Sa'id, and a woman-journalist called Laila, engage in amateur dramatics and decide to rehearse Shawqi's verse drama *Majnoon Laila* which retells the sad love story of the two famous historical Arab lovers. In acting the play, or rather scenes of it, the hero and heroine at once reveal and rediscover themselves, and Abdul Saboor scores a point: art (Shawqi's verse play) illuminates life (the relationships of the group working in the newspaper). As the modern Laila plays the role of her old romantic namesake who could not break free of her heritage of moral precepts and concepts of propriety, and was eventually destroyed by them, she discovers the nature of her love for Sa'id, her modern Qais, as a healthy all-round passion that demands physical fulfilment and con-

tinuity in the form of children. Tragically, however, she also discovers the abortive nature of her lover's passion, his enslavement to the oppressive shadows of past experiences, his dreamy escapist impulse, and his inability to take action. In desperation, like her old counterpart who gave her body to one man while her soul longed for another, she rushes into the arms of a colleague who is the exact opposite of her lover, though equally sterile.

Whereas Sa'id is purely a man of thought, all words and dreams and no deeds, her new lover is purely a man of action, completely devoid of thought. The result is that she swings from a physically poor but spiritually rich relationship into a spiritually poor but sexually satisfying affair. Laila, here, like the princess in the previous play, represents Egypt at one level, and the image of wholeness, of the organic unity of body and spirit, on another. But the poet here, unlike the poet in *A Princess Waiting* appears as an ineffectual dreamer who fails to make a positive stand in the face of historical events. His impotence condemns him, since it makes him directly responsible for Laila's fall. Once more, Hamlet's dilemma and consequent uncertainty haunt an Abdul Saboor hero. But, unlike the positive spirit that permeates *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj*, the mood here is predominantly one of defeat and paralysis.

The play within the play in *Laila and the Madman*, however, does not simply work as a vehicle of revelation or illumination; the author establishes a contrapuntal structure in which the relationship of the two texts (the contemporary-real and the artistic-historical) becomes more than a one-way comment; the interrelation of the two situations redefines both, and the result is a crystallization of the Don Quixotic nature of the hero, the symbol of Arab man, in both – an idea stressed by the painting of Don Quixote which hangs on the wall of the newspaper – and of Laila's tragedy, both old and new, as she loses herself between the worlds of the attainable and the desired, of hope, and achievement.

Laila and the Madman must have had a cathartic effect on Abdul Saboor, for it was immediately followed by the basically optimistic *Now the King is Dead*. Whether Nasser's death had anything to do with dispelling of the gloom that overburdened the previous play remains a matter for conjecture. An exhilirating sense of freedom, of having cast off a crushing load, is certainly transmitted to the reader,

despite the fact that Abdul Saboor stops short of giving the play a definite happy conclusion preferring to it a multiple ending. It is not surprising, therefore, to know that he admitted once to a close friend of his, Mr. Yunis Shaheen, that this last play was the closest to his heart.

The chronological place *Now The King is Dead* occupies in the corpus of Abdul Saboor's dramatic work is curiously appropriate since both thematically and technically, it concludes the imaginative inquiry, the philosophical-artistic quest that began with *Al-Hallaj*. Significantly, for the ten remaining years of his sadly short life (he died at the premature age of 50), Abdul Saboor never produced another drama, though he continued to write poetry.

In *Now The King is Dead*, which is significantly sub-titled a tragi-comedy, thus indicating its basic reconciliatory nature, Abdul Saboor gathers up all the thematic paradoxes and antithetical strands which dominated the previous plays and condenses them into one simple, though not simplified, major conflict between Eros and Thanatos, so that love comes to stand for all the positive values in human life, for wholeness, freedom, and vitality – political, physical and spiritual, while death represents all that is inimical to life – political oppression, physical deprivation, and spiritual coercion.

The simplicity of the conflict is matched by the basic simplicity of the characters and the design. The three main characters, the king, the Queen, and the Poet, represent Death, the female principle (the body of the world), and the male principle (the spirit of the world) in that order. When the queen and the poet unite (in the blood-stained ritualistic sexual union in Act II) they form together the creative force of love which mothers hope (the child). Abdul Saboor houses his bold, simple conflict and characters into the framework of a folk-tale of wonders; it tells of a bad and barren king who captures the queen of the river and a wandering poet and imprisons them in his dark formidable palace until the black bird of death invades his body. Upon his death the queen and the poet flee, and go on a restorative trip back to the river, but are pursued by the spirit of the dead king in the figure of the executioner. The poet defends the queen and by killing the executioner recovers his virility and is able to give the queen a child. Having regained their powers, the two make for the palace to rid it of the spirit of the king which still inhabits it and casts an evil spell on all its inhabitants, putting them into a deep sleep (18).

The manner in which Abdul Saboor ends his play, by providing three alternative endings and asking the audience to choose between them, may strike some as too dramatically sophisticated, and, therefore, at odds with the simplicity of the folk tale pattern. One should remember, however, that in many folk tales, which center on a quest involving many adventures, the hero is often asked at a particular point to make a decision involving many choices. One folk-tale in particular comes to mind in this connection; in it, 'El-Shatir Hasan' (Hasan the clever, a popular folk hero who has a whole group of stories to his name) having accomplished a difficult task, sets out for home only to be faced with a choice of routes; he comes across three paths labelled: "the road to safety" ("sikkat al-salama"); "the road to regret" (sikkat al-nadama"); and "the road of no return" ("sikkat elli yerooh ma yirga'sh"). 'Clever Hasan's' three roads must have been in Abdul Saboor's mind as he fashioned his three alternative endings, for one could easily give them the same labels as Hasan's routes. The first ending, in which the queen is lost in the underworld and the poet seeks her, Orpheus-like, but fails to recover her, could easily carry the label "the road of no return", while the second ending, (in which the poet and the queen delay going back to the palace until it is too late) could convincingly carry the sign "the road to regret". The only ending which could possibly by labelled "the road to safety", is the final happy one in which the queen and the poet, having united, rush back to the palace to dispel its gloom, drive away its dark shadows, and breathe new life into it by making it the home of all the people rather than the property of one of Nietzche's supermen and history-makers.

In *Now the King is Dead,* Abdul Saboor continues the critique of Nietzche's view of history which he had started in *Night Traveller* and carries it to the point of total open rejection. In the first act, in which the author deliberately but subtly evokes lonesco's *Exit the king* in order to invalidate the pessimistic philosophical premises on which it rests and which equalize the death of the king with the death of Man (19), we see, in the episode of the tailor, history being created by one of Nietzsche's supermen; and the history he makes is at once a sham and a shambles: the king as superman turns out to be a sterile, impotent, bloodthirsty, self-deceiving clown. At no other place in his work does Abdul-Saboor so savagely and abandonedly satirize Nietzsche's view of history, and the savagery of the attack testifies to the depth of Ab-

dul-Saboor's disillusionment with the reign of Nasser whom he had once believed in and idolized as a Nieztschean history-maker and superman.

To this view of history which he regarded as false, mechanical and fragmented, Abdul-Saboor opposes an organic view which is at once romantic, mythical, and pagan. Eastern and Western myths and folk-tales, as well as pagan ritual, are thickly interwoven into the fabric of the play. The queen is at once the familiar captive princess in distress of many folk tales, the goddess earth in pagan religions, waiting to be fertilized, a naiad, Wordsworth's spiritualized mother nature, the Greek Euridyce and Virgin Mary under the palm-tree in the august moment of communion with the Holy Ghost. Indeed, at the end of Act II, which marks the conception of the child, Abdul-Saboor versifies the Qur'anic text which describes this part of Mary's story and puts it in the mouth of the queen as she, in a state of near sexual orgasm, washes herself in the blood which drips from the poet's wound onto her head, like reviving rain drops falling on the parched earth, after the ritualistic fight between the poet and the emissary of the court, and the sacrificial killing of the executioner:

How wonderful it would be if the spirit of the universe

Could visit me here and breathe its mystery into me

Until it filled me, as a ripe fruit fills with honeyed juice!

And when my time comes,

I would go to the palm tree,

And shake the trunk towards me.....

If this could happen, we wouldn't need blood to settle our differences.

I would only have to point to the babe, and he would speak.

The element of pagan ritual, and the merging of Christian and pagan myth (the spirit of the universe = the Holy Ghost in the above lines) is not limited to this scene but, in fact, permeates the whole of Act II, and indeed the whole play. Take, for example, the following lines from the Queen's day-dream in Act I:

.....sometimes I see him in my mind's eye rising above the hills of time,

A glorious youth, at full noon-tide,

A clear, unclouded sun,

Shining upon the world, eternally pouring light,

Renewing it as it disperses,

An everlasting smile....

Abdul Saboor uses here the hymn ritual, the passionate song of adulation to the god, which has always formed an essential part of all religions, old and new, in order to identify the Queen's imaginary child with Christ, humanity's hope of spiritual salvation, on the one hand, and with the Ancient Egyptian Sun-god, Ra', the symbol of life's continuity on earth, on the other. The common ritual, Christian and pagan, thus unites the pagan god Ra' with Christ in a new entity which reconciles the earthiness of the pagan gods with the spirituality of the Gods of the revealed religions. This kind of synthesis is typical of the whole play. A few lines after the above speech, for example, Abdul Saboor describes his new ' Saviour ' as 'full of forgiveness, as brimming with tolerance, as a bee is with nectar', thus uniting moral qualities and functions with physical and animal ones. The physical (almost erotic) spiritual synthesis is again and again underlined in this scene. See for instance the way the Queen phrases the effect of the child, or the awaited Messiah, on her, even when he is still a mere hope or dream. She cries out:

How could I live without him beside me at night,

Without feeling my budding life open up and come to

Flower at his tender touch.

The passionately spiritual and the passionately sexual are here inextricably mingled.

The metaphoric synthesis of the spiritual and physical, of the pagan and Christian, is a basic element in the texture of the play. In Act II, however, it is more prominent, particularly as this act represents, within the movement of the play, a trip, a 'going out', on the physical and spiritual levels, and suggests the initiation rituals of some African tribes which involve the desertion of human society and living in the wilds alone for a while, after which one returns, after many torments and adventures, having acquired maturity. Francis Foulk has detected

this pattern in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (20) and it is certainly present in *As You Like It,* as well as other Shakespearean romantic comedies. And, indeed, more than any other Abdul-Saboorian play, *Now the King is Dead* comes closest to the spirit of Shakespeare's romantic comedies.

Act II, which forms the heart of the play, dramatizes, with its densely mythical and ritualistic atmosphere, the organic view of history Abdul-Saboor opposes to the sterile, mechanical, false one detailed in the first Act. Moreover, the two acts together dramatize the typically romantic conflict between nature and human society, or civilization, and between the view of the poet as a public voice, in the classical tradition, and the status of the poet as free singer and near divine seer in the Romantic tradition.

In the first act, when the poet has to tailor his poetry to the demands of his public or his patron he becomes artificial, superficial, stultified, and ultimately futile. This idea is dramatically stressed by the episode of the tailor who loses his tongue when he seeks to sell his art and fashion his material to the king's demands. His physical mutilation is a concrete metaphor for the poet's artistic and spiritual mutilation. This interpretation is borne out by the fact that the tailor constantly accompanies the poet, even in exile, until the poet finally regains his virility and his true voice. When this happens, the dumb, mutilated tailor disappears from the scene until the Queen summons him at the end of the play and asks him to stay with her as a reminder of the tyrannical, oppressive past.

From the point of view of dramatic technique, *Now the King is Dead* strikes one as Abdul-Saboor's most versatile play; indeed, it seems a veritable mine of dramatic styles despite its basic simplicity and clear folk-tale pattern. A reference has already been made to the strong presence of Ionesco's absurd drama *Exit the King* in Act I as well as to the similarity between the play's movement, as a fantastic folk drama, or a folk drama of wonders, and the movement of such *As Shakespearean* folk dramas as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like it,* which oppose Court and Forest and involve a central ritualistic 'going out' into nature by way of a metaphoric initiation ritual. But apart from Ionesco and Shakespeare, who are strongly present though not named, we find Aristotle and Brecht explicitly mentioned.

Indeed, Abdul Saboor manages to make the question of dramatic technique an important issue to the total meaning of the play.

At the beginning of Act I, he introduces three women who act as intermediaries between the play and the audience. And at this early stage in the play, one cannot quite decide whether they are meant to serve Brecht's or Pirandello's idea of the theatre; i.e., whether they are supposed to create an alienation effect, to relay a particular message, in the Brechtian sense, or introduce the idea of the theatre-in-the-theatre and the relativity of truth in the Pirandellian manner. Soon, however, Brecht imposes and asserts himself in Abdul-Saboor's mocking use of music, and his exaggerated, bombastic use of language which one feels are meant to arouse critical reflection. We see the play unfolding like a parable based on a folk-tale in the Brechtian fashion complete with all the Brechtian effects.

The prose-prologue presented by the chorus of three women at the beginning of Act II strengthens Brecht's technical hold on the play by enforcing the element of critical narration. More importantly, however, it takes up once more, and develops the theme of artistic rebellion, introduced in the prose-prologue which opened Act I. This theme runs through the whole play and merges with political, philosophical and existential rebellion to form an important part of its total meaning. The conflict between the artist and the inherited artistic modes (translated humourously into the conflict between Brecht as the representative of the new experimental spirit in the modern theatre, and Aristotle as the representative of the old, established, and nearly sanctified dramatic formula) re-enacts in the realm of art one of the many variations the play provides on the major and central conflict between life and death. Indeed, the prose parts of the play acted by the chorus form an independent subsidiary play when read together, or, more precisely, a kind of prose, comic sub-plot that runs parallel to the main poetic serious one, in the typical shakespearean manner. It is a sub-plot in which the central figure is at once a comical caricature of the Poet in the main plot and of Salah Abdul Saboor himself as poet and playwright. Abdul Saboor writes himself explicitly into the play as a 'dark, bespectacled author', slightly stuffy and pompous and a bit clownish. The action of this comic sub-plot consists in the struggles of this mock author to write a play according to the Aristotelian formula. In Act I we are told that this formula (particularly the concepts of ca-

tharsis and reversal) puzzles the dark bespectacled author and enslaves him and all the intellectuals who follow it dogmatically without really understanding it or knowing what it is all about. This part ends comically with a recitation from the *Poetics* which is soon drowned by the opening of the main plot.

Having puzzled over the function and development of tragedy according to Aristotle's theory in Act I, the mock-chorus and the mock-hero engage in Act II in deciphering the meaning of 'imitation', i.e., Aristotle's concept of the nature of drama. With the beginning of Act III, the action of the comic prose sub-plot reaches its climax: the mock Greek chorus despairingly declare that the author got stuck and urgently needs help; the Aristotelian formula has proved too restricting and, therefore, quite inadequate; it can neither fully contain the poet's vision, nor bring it to a convincing artistic resolution; for while the formula insists that 'a climax should be followed by a sad or happy ending', the mock-author, in total bewilderment now, cannot make up his mind which one to choose. In desperation he refers the matter to the audience and asks them, through the chorus, to settle it for themselves in the light of what they have seen of the play and what they know of their own experience of life, thus opting for Brecht, as the champion of rebellion against the old dramatic formulas, and, indeed, acting more Brechtian than Brecht himself. At the end of the first episode of Act III (the first of the three alternative endings the author provides), the chorus finally name Brecht, and his *Caucasian Chalk Circle* is used to provide the problematic ending to the trip to Hades which the Poet undertakes in search of his Queen. Abdul Saboor, however, takes pains to stress the folk element in Brecht's theatre by making direct reference to the original Solomon story which Brecht uses as a parable. One feels that, perhaps, it was Brecht's extensive use of folk material and old myths, as well as his revolutionary experimental spirit, more than his Marxist ideology and didactic aims, which attracted Abdul Saboor to his theatre. Indeed, in talking of Brecht, Abdul Saboor, almost in the same breath, pointedly mocks those intellectuals and men of letters who avidly follow the lastest experiments in modern western literature, and completely ignore their folk literature and traditions; and the mockery serves to underline the basic feature of the new dramatic formula Abdul Saboor was following in the play – namely, the reconciliation of western dramatic theory and practice and eastern folk theatrical norms.

The naming of Brecht, together with all the Brechtian techniques, particularly if one concentrates on the play's topical, social, and political message after Nasser's death, may persuade the reader to regard it, like Brecht's *Chalk Circle,* as a folk-tale used educationally. The political dimension in *Now the King is Dead* is frequently pointed out and has become almost a commonplace. Abdul Saboor's plays, however, often carry a much wider significance since in them he sought to work out not only his political but also his philosophical dilemmas. There is much more to *Now the King is Dead* than simply the teaching of a lesson or the offering of an indirect political commentary on the period of modern Egyptian history indicated in the title where the word 'king' spells out 'Nasser'. There is also much more to its technique than a mere servile imitation of Brecht.

The play poses several confrontations, apart from the political one, in the realms of art and metaphysics – areas always interrelated in Abdul Saboor's total vision. Political decision and action becomes in this play a free existentialist act that generates one's sense of identity, and an expression of the creative energy of the artist and the life force which refuse to be contained in dead, mechanical formulas, artistic, historical, metaphysical, or moral.

In this play, too, the opposition between the power of the word and the power of the sword, which tormented Al-Hallaj in his world of moral uncertainty, is resolved by the physical and "functional" identification of the sword with poet's flute (the poet stabs the executioner with his flute, and blinds him, thus reducing the actual sword to a blind, ineffectual instrument and transforming the flute into the real sword), and by the subsequent metaphoric transformation of the sword into a phallic symbol – an instrument of love and recreation: it stands conspicuously in view, propped up against the wall of the cottage, while the poet and the queen make love inside.

The uncertainty of the results of the choice between logos and praxis, which tormented the hero in the highly charged emotional and moral atmosphere of *Al-Hallaj,* gives way here to a kind of intuitive, instinctive certainty in the relaxed, pagan atmosphere of the play where vitality is the only positive value conducive to moral good. Indeed, moral sophistry and philosophical equivocation would have been singularly out of place in the simple world of the folk-tale Abdul-Saboor chose.

Now the King is Dead adopts the simple and clear moral code which governs all folk-literature the world over. It is a code according to which evil is defined simply as all that makes for barrenness, as a force of destruction; it is all that threatens life, be it a drought sent by the gods, a curse, or a spell cast by a witch, or a bad king. Good, on the other hand, is fertility – all that liberates the creative energy in man and nature. This is the simple morality which Abdul Saboor finally opted for in his last play, and one cannot help hoping that the man enjoyed something of its sunny serenity in his last years.

Notes

(1) For a short review of the history of Arabic poetic drama in Egypt, see M. Enani's Introduction to his English translation of I. Ismail's verse play *The Trial of an Unknown Man,* Egyptian State Publishing House, Cairo, 1985.

(2) "Introduction" to Abdul Saboor's *Night Traveller,* Translated by M.Enani, State Publishing House, Cairo, 1980, P.7.

(3) The characteristics of this movement, its development and leading figures are fully discussed in Dr. M. Enani's Introduction to his *Anthology of the New Arabic Poetry in Egypt,* State Publishing House, Cairo, 1986.

(4) See A.M. Al-Ghozamy's analysis of the problematic and paradoxical historical-modern implications of the exodus theme in Abdul Saboor's poem entitled 'Exodus' in his article "How to Appreciate A Modern Poem", *Fusul,* IV, iv, Aug.- Sept., 1984,pp.97-106.

(5) *Fusul,* II.i., Oct., 1981, pp. 37-51.

(6) In *My Life in Poetry* (Beirut, 19, p.114), Abdul Saboor mentions two earlier attempts prior to *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj.* He abandoned the first because the hero, an Algerian intellectual caught up in the violence and bloodshed of the war of liberation, came too uncomfortably close to Hamlet, and the second, because it seemed unconsciously to arrange itself along the lines of Shakespeare'a *Julius Caesar,* with its hero, the Arab poet Al-Muhalhal Bin Rabi'a, growing more and more reminiscent of Antony. Indeed, Saboor never quite managed to shake off completely Shakespeare's influence. The Bard made too deep an impression on his mind, so that when he came to write his play, *Al-Hallaj,* Hamlet was still dogging his hero. In the following plays, Shakespeare is overshadowed by other dramatists – Brecht, Ionesce, Lorka, Maeterlink, to name the most obvious ones; however, he remains deeply buried in the folds of Saboor's language and imagery to surface every now and then with surprising freshness. The influence of Eliot on Saboor has been widely detected and commented on (and Saboor himself drew attention to it by his translations of *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Cocktail Party*).

Shakespeare's influence on Saboor, though equally strong, but, perhaps, because more subtle, has received less critical attention. I believe that a statistical study of Shakespearean echoes in Saboor's work is overdue, and could be quite rewarding, particularly since Abdul Saboor set about translating *King Lear* at one time, though he never finished it.

(7) All plays were successfully staged in Egypt: *Al-Hallaj* was performed twice in 1968, once in Alexandria, directed by Hassan Abdul Salam, and again in Cairo, directed by the brilliant Samir Al-Asfouri at the Opera House. The production was later transferred to Wikalat Al Ghouri, a kind of popular open-air theatre, surrounded by an old historical building in the Islamic quarter of El-Hussein in Old Cairo. *A Princess Waiting* was performed at the Avant-garde theatre in Cairo in 1969, directed by Nabil Al-Alfi, who later directed *Now The King is Dead* For the National Theatre in Cairo in 1972. A year earlier, in 1971, Abdul Rahim Al-Zurqqani had directed *Laila and the Madman* for the Avant-garde theatre. and, at the same theatre, Farouk Zaki directed successively in 1981, and 1982, *Night Traveller* and *A Princess Waiting*.

(8) *Fusul*, II.i, Oct. 1981, p. 128.

(9) As a boy, Abdul-Saboor had a shattering mystical trance. See *My Life in Poetry*, pp. 80-81.

(10) See Abdul-Saboor's note to the play, and *My Life in Poetry*, p.118.

(11) *Fusul*, II, i, Oct., 1981, pp. 133-135.

(12) The similarity between Abdul Saboor and Byron does not stop at the universal quality of the minds of both men; they both had a strong erotic streak which coloured all their responses and mental processes, and both viewed the relation between heaven and earth in terms of a physical union. In Saboor, spiritual passion is translated into sexual imagery, particularly in his last play, in the same manner in which Byron's image of existence as a fountain suggests both a phallus and the motion of the sexual act. See my book *Byron's Plays, A Reading in the Context of Modernism*, Egyptian State Publishing House, 1986.

(13) See Nancy Salama, "The Influence of Ionesco on Night Traveller", *Fusul*. II. i. Oct. 1981, pp. 145-151; and Samir Sarhan's "Introduction" to Enani's translation of *Night Traveller*, op. Cit.

(14) *Night Traveller*, p. 19

(15) See *My Life in Poetry*, pp. 40-43.

(16) See Isam Bahi, "Myth and Folklore in the Dramas of Abdul Saboor", *Fusul*, II.i., Oct. 1981, p.141.

(17) See Badr Tawfiq, "The Princess between Death and Waiting", *Theatre Magazine*, July-Agust, 1970. pp. 78-83.

(18) The Appearance of the palace and the king's men at the opening of the second episode (or proposed ending) in act three strongly suggests the bespelled palace in Sleeping Beauty with one ironical difference which Abdul Saboor, with his keen sense of humour, could not have been unaware of: the Sleeping Beauty here is not a beautiful princess, but the rotting corpse of the dead king.

(19) The similarity between the first act and Ionesco's play is quite unmistakable and extends from the state of the kingdom in both to the comic antics of the king, the theme of barrenness and depopulation, the fondness of the king for games, as well as to the manner of his death. Indeed, one suspects that Abdul Saboor's choice of title was a deliberate dig at Ionesco's play.

(20) "Dream and Ritual in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Comparative Drama*, 14,3, Autumn, 1980.

Poetry on the Stage

2- Back to Andalusia: The Amorous Vizier or The Fall of Cordova

Though poetic drama has long gone out of fashion with the ordinary Egyptian theatre-goer, Farouk Guwaida's *The Amorous Vizier* (re-titled *The Fall of Cordova* in the English version by M.M.Enani) proved a huge success with the public when it was first shown in 1984. Though written in the free verse mode initiated in the '60's by Salah Abdul Saboor and other pioneers of the New Movement (1), its style retains certain aspects of the traditional Arabic poem and, at times, captures something of its flavour. Indeed, its author, Mr. Farouk Guwaida, occupies a somewhat singular position among the poets of the second generation of the New Verse Movement. Not only has he managed to escape the influence of the overpowering tonalities, imagery patterns, heavily allusive diction and bawdy-mystical streak typical of the Abdul-Saboor poem, and develop a distinct individual voice, but he also often experiments with the traditional metrical forms and rhyme patterns to produce quasi-classical pieces that preserve the clarity, logical simplicity and pronounced musicality of the old poem, and yet have nothing of its amorphous quality or diffuseness. In such old poems as *To the Nile,* for instance, which he modelled on a poem by Abul Tayyib Al-Mutanabbi, written in the ninth century A.D., Guwaida manipulates the rigid regularity of the rhyt-

mical form to develop a taut metaphorical scheme, and uses humorous and serious words alternately in the rhyming line endings to create a cumulative ironical effect. The result is a poem that combines the form and spirit of classical satire as well as the sophisticated ironical tone, and organic structure, of modern poetry.

Mr. Guwaida's early poetry was uniformly lyrical in the high romantic tradition and dealt mostly with the themes of love, departure, the vague longings of youth, the agonies of desertion and so on. This, together with the simplicity of his diction and the metres he chose, guaranteed his accessibility at a time when poetry was increasingly becoming something of a puzzle to the ordinary reader. He won a wide readership at once, particularly among the young, and his popularity has persisted even though his style has changed.

As early as his second collection of poetry, *Love will Survive,* also written in his twenties, one detects a new tone of philosophical sobriety creeping into the poetry and tinging the sweet romantic sadness. What is more, the poetry begins conspicuously to relate to the contemporary political scene so that the existential suffering of the poet is located in a particular concrete reality and acquires a justification, or, in the Wordsworthian fashion, a local habitation and a name. In poems like *When the Man Dies in Us,* or *Sad Times,* or *When Wolves Reign,* Guwaida relates his spiritual *ennui* to the political turmoil, contradictions and uncertainities which have characterized recent Egyptian history since the 1952 revolution. Having trained as a journalist and worked for a number of years in the Economic Section of the national newspaper *Al-Ahram* (where he now edits the cultural page), Mr. Guwaida could not very well have kept politics and economics out of his poetry. In the six collections that followed – *The Longing Returns, Your Eyes: My Home, Forever in My Heart, Because I Love You, Something will Survive, and I Had the Heart to Forget* – love and politics are almost inseparable, and their interaction gives the poetry a sense of urgency and a palpable dramatic quality. In these collections too, Guwaida extended his technical scope and tried his hand, with successful results, at various forms: at the symbolic poem, as in *The Return of the Prophets* and other pieces for instance; at the narrative, allegorical form (in a series of related poems entitled *After the Departure of the Sun);* at the expressionistic poem, as in *The Features of an Old Face Lost;* and at political satire (as in *To a River*

Tamed). In this latter form he revealed a hitherto hidden sense of humour and a capacity for scathing irony.

The poem form, however, despite all these experiments, could not fully accommodate Guwaida's growing poetic interests and concerns. He, therefore, turned to drama and wrote *The Amorous Vizier*. It was performed in Cairo in the winter season of 1984-85 and took the theatrical scene quite by storm. Its success was repeated when it toured other Arab countries, and represented Egypt at several Arab theatre festivals.

Guwaida took his material for *The Amorous Vizier* from the history of al-Andalus, the name given by the Arab Muslims to the Iberian Peninsula after its occupation in the 8th century. His dramatic handling of this material, however, is extremely novel and interesting. The dramatic time-frame of the play, which begins with Ibn Zaydoun's viziership and ends with his death, could not reasonably encompass more than fifty years. Historically speaking, however, the play begins in the early 11th century, after the breakup of the unified Muslim State (established by the Umayyad Abdul Rahman I in 765), the subsequent disintegration of the Caliphate (declared by Abdul Rahman III in 929) and the beginning of the period of the petty Muslim kingdoms of Spain (*taifas*). As the play proceeds, actual historical time is speedily contracted, and nearly two hundred years are compressed into fifty, so that the play ends in the 13th century with the fall of Cordova to the Castillian king Ferdinand III in 1236.

This curious handling of time, in which Guwaida follows the example of Shakespeare in *Othello*, produces two conflicting time scales with interesting dramatic vesults: as historical time gets constantly negated by imaginative 'representational time', a new temporal mode emerges, a kind of 'non-time' dimension which allows the co-occurrence of all sorts of characters and events, which could not possibly have existed at the same time, and, which is more important for the purposes of the author, makes it both easy and natural for the audience to identify the past historical scene with the present-day realities of the Arab world, be at once in the present and in the past, and to relive the loss of Palestine in mourning the fall of Cordova.

In view of the temporal scheme of the play, one can easily accept, and, indeed, dramatically justify what some have called inaccuracies,

castigated as pure invention, and condemned as anachronisms. In his treatment of space, Guwaida follows similar practice: literal space, i.e., the definite identity of places, is negated by representational space, i.e., the changing scene on the stage. In Part I, scene iii, for instance, the stage encompasses Ibn Zaydoun's home, the court of the First King, the court of the Second King, and the routes connecting them all. It takes Ibn Zaydoun only a few steps on the stage to move imaginatively from one place to another, and the time compression is matched by the compression of space. And just as the conflict of literal and representational time produces the play's symbolic temporal mode, or 'non-time', the merging of literal into representational space creates a symbolic 'non-space' into which all places merge into the identity of the sacred homeland.

This sacred homeland is symbolically embodied in the heroine, Walladah, who also stands for faith, loyalty, unity, true consciousness, and all the positive values in the life of a nation. Unlike her historical counterpart, she remains loyal to Ibn Zaydoun throughout and until his death. The real, historical Walladah, daughter of the last Umayyad Caliph of Andlusia, al-Mustakfi, was a pleasure-loving princess, fond of poetry and men, and had no interest in politics whatsoever. Moreover, her relationship with Ibn Zaydoun lasted only for two years after which she deserted him for another, a rival statesman (Rabi' in the play), with whom she lived for a great number of years – in fact, until her death. The Walladah of the play, however, is not a mere abstraction; she is invested with a few naturalistic details which render her quite convincing, and rather moving at times. In scene iv of Part I, for example, she functions as a symbol until near the end of the scene when she suddenly springs to life as a character and touchingly asks, having failed to persuade her lover to work with the people rather than the rulers, and to give up the corrupt game of power :

> Would you still have me without a throne?

And when he hesitates she convincingly exclaims, quite at home in the western naturalistic tradition:

> Oh don't answer! Say nothing!
>
> I know enough already!

and exits.

The symbolical treatment of time, place and character, and the few naturalistic details here and there, do not, however, fully explain the technique of the play or its dramatic formula since Ibn Zaydoun, the hero, is presented to us a full-fledged tragic hero in the tradition of classical tragedy. As such, he is the centre of all action, the person around whose decisions and moves everything pivots. He is also suitably furnished with the all – hallowed Aristotelian tragic flow: he believes that real power lies with the establishment rather than with the people and, therefore, refuses to listen to Walladah who warns him, and chooses to work with the corrupt rulers of the Islamic World (who are satirically modelled on presest-day rulers). In doing this he betrays at once his nation and his faith and pays for his guilt with his life.

As a tragic hero, Guwaida's Ibn Zaydoun (who, unlike the real historical one who went to prison twice for short periods, spends most of his life in prison) often assumes an oratorical mode of speech. However, the tone of lament and exhortation he frequently adopts, and his elegiac mood which establishes itself early on in the play (and implies a frontal, demonstrative mode of acting in which the actor addresses the audience rather than the actors around him on the stage) – this elegiac mood and exhortatory lamentatory mode cannot be fully explained or justified in terms of classical tragedy or, indeed, Brecht's epic theatre (which the play superficially resembles in certain aspects), let alone the naturalistic tradition. The play points in fact in another direction , to a different, though equally old, theatrical tradition – namely, the Iranian Ta' ziyeh. The Ta ziyeh is at once a folk opera and a confessional, expiatory ritual performed yearly in the Muslim month of Muharram to commemorate the martyrdom, on the plain of Kerbela in 680 A .D., of the Prophet's grandson, al-Hussein, following his betrayal by the people of Kufa in Iraq (who had summoned him and promised him support against his political rival, the Sunnite Caliph, Yazid).

The Ta'ziyeh was once described as the 'indigenous avantgarde theatre of Iran which holds the promise of stimulating new theatrical ideas and experiments' (2). *The Fall of Cordova,* in my view, can be read as one such experiment. In it, as in the Ta'ziyeh, time and place are universalized, and dialogue functions not so much as a device to convey or develop the plot (which is flimsy and well-known beforehand), but as a means of reinforcing a particular religious and ideo-

logical order, and investing political action with religious ardor.

Political events in *The Fall of Cordova* carry strong religious implications : the power-struggle among the kings is seen not just as a threat to the bodypolitic, but as a threat to the faith itself, and the fall of the city is presented as the fall Islam, of the city of God. In this mood, the distant historical event is received and relived, and the performance acquires something of the spirit of a confessional ritual.

Guilt, martyrdom, and lamentation, the three cornerstones of the Ta'ziyeh ritual, figure prominently in Guwaida's play; they are summed up and implied in the word 'loss' which occurs quite frequently, and explode with a tremendous crash in the chorus of the final scene:

O Messenger of Allah!
My tears flow whenever I direct my face
Towards your exalted Qiblah!
The guilt I carry around my neck
Is unbearable, ...
Oh Messenger of Allah!
I am crying today
When it is too late to cry!
What boots it if my tears flow,
Now that the people are beginning to go
Deserting their glory and great homeland?
The Minarets of Islam are silent,
Lost in sad perplexity;
While the streets of Cordova
Are belching the Frankish army;
The prayers in our minarets are silent,

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(2) See Peter L. Chelkowski, "Ta'ziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran", in *Ta'ziyeh; Ritual and Drama in Iran,* edited by Peter Chelkowski, New York University. 1979,p.11.

Will no one cry:

Allah is Great?

Will that call die

On people's lips?

The novelty of Guwaida's play, its significant dramatic contribution, and the secret of its astonishing success and emotional impact lie exactly in this: that it used the episodic form, political orientation, and demonstrative style characteristic of the Brechtian epic theatre but in the mood of an oratorio, and created a type of confessional, cathartic performance in which historical events are translated into spiritual ones.

Appendix (V)

A Brief Look at the History of the Private and Public Sectors in Egyptian Theatre

The term 'private-sector' theatre is relatively recent. It dates back to the early sixties in Egypt, a period which witnessed the emergence of several state-run and funded theatre companies; together they formed what has come to be known as the public-sector theatre. This immediately bracketed, or, rather, branded all independent companies as private-sector.

The term, however, does not simply refer to a mode of production and administration or a financial source. Indeed, more often than not, it is used pejoratively to denote crass commercialism, cheap, vulgar entertainment and sloppy, vapid art. In contrast, 'public-sector theatre' has become a term of high praise, almost synonymous with revolutionary thought, progressive ideas and serious, committed art. To my mind, this is an extreme, unfair and rather simplistic view which badly needs balancing. After all, it was free enterprise and independent artists who introduced the art of theatre into Egypt and nurtured it before the advent of the public-sector. These artists deserve justice and recognition, and if we are to lump all private, independent theatre practices under the rubric ``private-sector theatre', then the term must first be freed of its pernicious, derogatory implication. A brief look at the

history of Egyptian theatre before the emergence of the public-sector might be a helpful first step in this direction.

There are some who claim that the history of the Egyptian theatre dates back to the Pharaohs of the Old Kingdom and trace its course through the middle ages and the Shadow-plays of Mohamed Ibn Danial in the 13th century. Some go a step further and insist that a history of the Egyptian theatre should also count as theatre all social and religious ceremonies and rituals and all forms of popular entertainment. There are others, however, who take a completely opposite view and insist that Egypt did not know theatre in the proper sense before the 19th Century-- the proper sense being of course the Western European sense which implies a fixed playhouse with a picture-frame stage where a story unfolds through impersonation before viewers.

Leaving the thorny, problematic issue of what constitutes theatre apart, I shall steer a middle course and suggest that the history of the Egyptian theatre is one of integrating a fully developed European dramatic tradition with an old, indigenous, rudimentary one.

When this process of integration began precisely is impossible to say. There are records of theatrical companies in Egypt which date back to the 18th century. The majority of historians, however, prefer to place the beginning of this process in the latter half of the 19th century, and credit both Marun El-Naqqash and Ya'coob Sannu' with its initiation.

Marun El-Naqqash, a Syrian who knew French and Italian as well as Arabic and Turkish, initiated the process of adapting European drama to Arabic tastes when he presented at his home in 1848 his adaptation of Moliere's *L'Avare* and followed it up with *Le Tartuffe*. In the two plays he introduced instrumental music and singing, giving the performance a crude operatic quality. He also set the dialogue in colloquial Arabic, revised and altered the plot to suit the tastes and views of his audience, changed the locale to an Arab town and gave the characters Arabic names.

El-Naqqash never came to Egypt, but his followers and disciples did, as refugees, after the anti-Christian riots in Syria in 1860. And for nearly a century, the musical adaptation of foreign texts became a very popular genre, with El-Naqqash's two adaptations serving as models.

Ya'coob Sannu', on the other hand (an Egyptian Jew of Italian extraction), is credited with having established the first Egyptian theatre company on the western model. He wrote and directed social and satirical comedies, with realistic settings, in a free, fluid form that allowed for a lot of improvisation. Like El-Naqqash, Moliere was his model and source of inspiration. Calling himself the Egyptian Moliere, he dreamt of creating an Egyptian theatre in the Western style. His ambitious project, however, was nipped in the bud when he was forced to close down his theatre and leave the country by the Khedive Isma'il in 1872, only two years after setting up his company. Nevertheless, he had given in that short spell 35 productions and his influence on the Egyptian theatre was seminal and far-reaching.

The point I would like to emphasize here is that the beginnings of the Egyptian theatre are rooted in the so-called 'private-sector'.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the trend set by El-Naqqash flourished at the hands of Salama Hijazi who formed his successful company in 1905 and turned the classics of the European theatre - like *Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet* and *The Lady of the Camellias* - into operetta-like musical productions. This type of musical play continued to be popular well into the 20s and reached a maturer form in the much celebrated works of Sayeid Darwish, particularly his *Scheherezade and The Ten of Diamonds*.

Around the same time, and side by side with the musical play, another genre appeared - namely, classical heroic drama. Its chief exponent was George Abyad who studied acting in Paris and formed his own troupe in 1912.

The taste for serious drama continued to grow and the period between the two world wars witnessed a definite change. Naguib El-Rihani who had earlier specialized in farces, creating the popular character of 'Kish-Kish Bey', began to develop a more serious type of comedy that touched upon social issues and problems. More significantly, poetic drama found a place for itself on the stage when the Fatma Rushdi company, set up in 1927, presented in succession four plays by poet-laureate Ahmad Shawqi. The famous Ramses company, founded by the great actor Yusuf Wahbi, followed suit and presented another of Shawqi's plays. In the repertoire of the Ramses company, too, we find the historical play and the realistic melodrama.

In 1935, the first state theatre company was established. It was called the *Egyptian Theatre Company* an it naturally drew to its ranks many of the best acting talents in the 'serious' theatre. A few years later, the War broke out and the theatre, private or state-run, struggled to survive.

But the War was like a watershed in the history of the Egyptian theatre. It was as if a whole age was coming to an end. Things were never quite the same afterwards.

The next ten years were a period of political turmoil leading up to the 1952 revolution or military coup d'etat. Besides, interest in the theatre was rapidly dwindling in favour of the cinema which drew away form the boards many brilliant actors and comic talents. The days of free theatrical enterprise were fast fading to make room for the dawn of the 'public-sector theatre' of the sixties. But before that dawn arrived, which would label it and damn it as 'private-sector', in the period between 1952 and 1961, the independent theatre made a final brave effort at self-vindication. *The Free Theatre* troupe was born in October 1952 and was soon followed by the revival of *The Society of the Acting and Cinema Champions*. But more of that later. Boulevard theatre too, at its last gasp, clung desperately to life. The Naguib El-Rihani troupe regrouped themselves after his death and revived his famous hits with Adel Khayri (the son of the author of those hits, Badi' Khayri) in the star role. Another popular comedian, Ismail Yasseen, who had made his fame on the silver screen but was fast growing out of fashion, formed his own company in 1954 and managed to keep going for 12 years. In 1958, the members of a popular radio comedy show went into the business of theatre, but the venture failed and they closed down in 1961. Other efforts by other comedians were made, but they were more like bubbles which soon burst. The sixties were drawing near, and the division of theatre into private and public sectors was in the offing.

Almost from its very inception, the division was ideologically charged and targeted, and implied a definite value judgement. One must not forget that the rise of the public-sector in culture and the arts came immediately after, and was directly prompted by the regime's definite and sharp swing in he direction of a quasi-Marxist form of socialism. The wholesale nationalization of private businesses and property initiated by the July Socialist Decrees of 1961 was immediately

followed by the setting up of state-controlled cultural and artistic organs which were, at least partly, intended as forums to disseminate the 'new' ideas and popularize the regime's extreme socialist policies. Sever critics of Nasser's regime would also add that those organs and the intense cultural and artistic activity they generated were meant to sidetrack people's minds from the debacle of the unity with Syria and give them renewed faith in their government.

But whatever the motives, five new performing troupes (known as The State Television-Theatre Troupes) were created in 1962 to provide live productions which would later be televised.They were soon after replaced by four major state-run companies, namely, *The Comedy, The Modern, The World Drama* and the *Pocket* theatres. There was also the *Puppet Theatre,* a music and dance troupe, folk-dance troupes, and, of course, the old *National Theatre*.

As happened before, when the state Egyptian Theatre Company was established, these new state companies inevitably attracted theatre artists, and this time on a much larger scale. Not only did they provide regular work opportunities, monthly salaries and, eventually, a pension, they also enjoyed the support of the critics and the media, particularly television. The prospect of fame and financial security, besides the lure of good parts in 'respectable', 'committed' productions, practically drained the market of any good actors who were not state-employed.

The greatest and most damaging blow to the, by now called, private-sector theatre was, perhaps, the absorption into the public-sector theatre of the prestigious, independent Free Theatre (El-Masrah El-Hor). This troupe, which occupies in the history of Egyptian drama a very similar place to that of Antoine's *Theatre Libre* in France or the *Freie Buhne* in Germany, was a private enterprise launched, funded and run by a group of young, enthusiastic graduates of the Theatre Institute. It came into being in October, 1952, and its headquarters was a small flat in town.

It had no permanent performing space and had to rent either the Opera or the Azbakiyyah theatre (the seat of the National) against forty pounds per night; and to cover the rent, they gave two performances a day. But even with that, they could not afford more than a two-week run for each production, and the theatres' management anyway would

not have let them occupy their buildings longer. None of the members of the troupe was paid any money, and though they charged admission fees, all the proceeds of the box-office went towards financing the productions, and more often than not, they had to be supplemented out of the members' pockets.

Poor, struggling and semi-professional they may have been, but they were certainly confident, dauntlessly rebellious, and limitlessly ambitious. They rejected the hackneyed tradition of the dwindling boulevard theatre while rebelling against the deeply entrenched classical and declamatory tradition hallowed by the *Egyptian Company,* the only state theatre then. They dreamt of a new kind of drama that could reflect the realities and turbulent changes in contemporary Egyptian life.

Predominantly 'left' in their leanings, they found their ideal in Gorki, Chekov and social realism and continued to mine that vein thought the fifties. Writers like No'man Ashoor and Rashad Rushdi, and directors like Sa'd Ardash, who were later to become leading figures in the Egyptian and Arab theatre, made their debut there and contributed richly to the success of the troupe. Within a short period of its birth, *The Free Theatre* became a major force in the Egyptian theatre with an ever-increasing influence. Even the hard-core conservative and classical *Egyptian Company* succumbed to the wave of social realism and embraced a new brilliant young talent by the name of Yusuf Idris. *The Free Theatre,* however, with its pronounced left-wing sympathies, was bound to gravitate to the public-sector theatre with its ideological underpinnings. Its members embraced it, becoming its ardent champions and sturdy pillars.

Another independent, serious, semi-professional troupe which was to be sucked into the public-sector theatre was *The Acting and Cinema Champions.* Unlike *The Free Theatre,* this company had a long and chequered history. Its origins date back to 1913 when a group of intellectuals and theatre-lovers formed a society which they christened *The Champions of Acting.* Its moving spirit and dynamic force was Suliman Naguib, who was later to achieve great fame as a professional actor. But though Mr. Naguib and his 'champions' were intensely enthusiastic, they worked in fits and starts; their productions, though invariably good, were few and far between. The society continued for a number of years before it was disbanded.

In 1932, however, Mr. Naguib decided to revive it, adding to the championing of the art of acting the championing of the new art of the cinema, and renaming it The Acting and Cinema Champions. But despite the name, the pattern of the work and its rhythm were the same as before. With Naguib's death, the rhythm ceased altogether and the society was dismantled.

Naguib's pet cause, however, was to have a new lease of life and find new champions. Mohamed Tawfiq, who trained in England as an actor, and Mahmoud El-Sabba', an actor and director, together with a group of writers, actors and intellectuals reformed the society, rented the Opera for two weeks and launched themselves with a double-bill: *Mere Ink on Paper* and *Love and Matrimony.* But promising as the opening was and some of the subsequent productions, the enterprise was to prove short-lived. Like the champions of the Free Theatre, those of Acting and the Cinema were soon to be swallowed by the swelling waves of the state-run theatre. When the tide changed, however, as it always does, they were thrown up and cast on very craggy and arid shores indeed.

The public-sector theatre reigned almost completely unchallenged for four years. To the best of my knowledge, and according to theatre historian Samir Awad, the number of private-sector companies in the period between 1962 and 1967, the year of the disastrous military defeat, did not exceed three or four at the most. Between '67 and the mid eighties they soared up to thirteen or thereabout.

1967, then, was a definite turning point. The defeat dashed all our dreams, leaving us in a state of near paralysis. When the initial shock was over, a heavy mood of despondency descended over the country stifling its energies. It took some time before our creative writers and artists, who had believed in the regime and supported it, could regain their balance, assimilate what had happened and bounce back into the creative arena. When they did, they took the regime to pieces, ruthlessly baring its faults, and inevitably clashed with it. As many as nine plays by the leading writers of the fifties and sixties were banned by the censor. The public, therefore, was denied access to the best and only fruits a bitter defeat can yield, namely, wisdom and consciousness. They were left a prey to frustrated incomprehension and dazed despair. For comfort and forgetfulness they turned to cheap forms of entertainment. There was a sudden eruption of vulgar, cynical, nihil-

istic and nonsensical songs which gained wide popularity. Pop singer Ahmad Adawiyya was suddenly all the rage. What truly deserves to be labelled 'private-sector' art, in the worst and most insidious sense, was gaining the upper hand.

The situation worsened after Nasser's death. With Sadat's access to power, the nation was once more jolted out of one ideological and economic frame and into another. A chaotic type of economic liberalism or *laisser faire,* called the open-door policy, replaced the strict and sometimes oppressive socialism of Nasser. Economically, the open-door policy spawned a rabid, ruthless and sterile form of free enterprise which consisted in shady deals, unconscionable commercial exploitation and easy, quick profit. Socially, it turned society topsy-turvy, raising to the top a new class of filthy rich philistine and ignorant, pretentious upstarts. Morally, it turned cash into the sole criterion of value and human worth. Culturally, it led into a veritable dead-end - a densely dark blind alley.

The state theatre which had suffered suppression in the last years of Nasser's reign because of its critical audacity was now fought by a more lethal weapon - indifference and neglect. Sadat could not hope to rally its artists to his side since they were mostly left-wing. So, he made a show of patronizing the arts, with an annual ceremony of recognition, and meanwhile encouraged religious fundamentalism to use it as a weapon against the left-wing. Ironically, the monster he let loose soon turned upon him. Unfortunately, however, it is still with us, and threatening to sink its fangs and claws into the arts.

To the open-door policy and its consequences, and the rise of religious fanaticism, one must add another important factor which played and is still playing havoc with society and the arts - namely, oil-power. The effects of this invisible power can be clearly seen in the kind of plays, television dramas and serials which are tailored to suit the oil-rich tastes which, in many cases, finance, consume, and make huge profits out of them. Like the rich philistine and ignorant *nouveau riche,* the oil-rich visitor, squandering money right and left, with not a single idea in his head or a shred of culture, became a model, an ideal and a master to be served and catered for.

Within a few years of Nasser's death, we woke up one fine morning to discover that the whole country had turned into one huge market-place where everything could be sold if you named the right price.

In this market-place, intellectuals, serious artists, students, educated people, professionals and ordinary decent men and women of any calling had no place. What they had to sell the market did not want, and what they wanted was not available on the market. They were like strangers in their own home. Do you wonder that many of them have departed?!

For those who stayed, the theatre - good, stimulating, entertaining and thought-provoking theatre - became a distant memory of the past. Some remembered good plays from the sixties and the fifties, and the older ones, plays from the twenties and thirties.The extremely young, however, remembered nothing, for they had seen nothing. For them, theatre was an unknown experience, except for what little they saw of it on television, which, in any case, would not normally rank as theatre in any sane country.

There were of course some pockets of resistance left, mainly in the regional theatres; and, occasionally, the public-sector theatre would briefly burst into life. It would soon, however, sink back into lethargy, burdened by an ever-swelling bureaucracy which regularly ate up most of its measly budget, leaving only a few crumbs for artistic purposes. The indifference of the media, too,was sickening. How can you draw people out of their homes to see a play if they do not know about it ?!

In the situation I have tried to sketch above, which still subsists, it was natural that cheap, commercial entertainment should be rife on the stage. From the seventies onwards, there was a huge demand for it and a wealthy clientele. Who could resist? The so-called 'private-sector' companies engaged in fierce competition to meet the demand and win the tender - and have been doing so ever since. Eventually, impoverished by their haughty artistic aloofness, the public-sector companies too decided to enter the bidding for this new fat audience and lower their standards even more than their opponents of the private-sector to win it. What a far cry this is from the days of the Ramses company!

Moreover, with inflation sending the costs of productions rocketing to the sky, the state theatre could not hope to compete for the private theatres' patrons. They can neither afford the film stars, the lavish, if garish, sets and costumes, the dancers or the musicians that

attract that type of audience. The results of such competitions are usually disastrous for the poorer party.

Ironically, though, while the public sector theatre is trying hard to lower its standards, and is progressively succeeding, some private-sector companies are doing exactly the opposite. But, curiously, the state's rules and regulations seem intent on putting them at the mercy of the rules of supply and demand, not to mention the mercy of the oil-rich tourist.

Taxation, whatever the quality of the production - serious or commercial - eats up a third of the box-office proceeds. The state too has stopped building theatres a long time ago and the wealthy businessmen would rather build a mosque than a theatre. This situation has led to an exorbitant rise in annual rents and a terrible shortage of performing spaces. The use of original, untraditional spaces by young private troupes could help in solving the problem. But then, there are the emergency laws, and all kinds of other laws that cripple private initiative.

Some tax concessions, more lenient and flexible laws, more theatres and a system of grants for serious private troupes could perhaps help restore to the private-sector theatre something of its former dignity and integrity.

The picture I have drawn of the history and progress of the private-sector theatre before and after the rise of the public-sector theatre is certainly disheartening and quite bleak. A few spots of light, however, remain, scattered here and there - Galal El-Sharkawi's memorable *Coup d'Etat* at his Art Studio theatre; the new free-theatre movement with its many struggling, self-funding troupes and its annual festival; the United Artists' production of Durrenmatt's The Visit in 1983. But the brightest spot of all remains the wonderful duo, director-actor Mohamed Subhi and playwright Lenin El-Ramly, and their joint venture, Studio 80.

They both graduated from the Theatre Institute and worked separately until 1980 when they teamed up to start their company. Over the years, they worked out a distinctive style which is at once fantastic, spectacular, whimsical, funny, metaphoric, and deeply serious. In famous hits like *The Lesson Is Over, The Savage, Point of View* or *In Plain Arabic,* the production is invariably structured round a metaphor which is then translated into a variety of thrilling, concrete theatrical

images. And in all their productions an impish spirit of benevolent mischief and an overwhelming sense of vitality and imaginative power invariably infect the audience.

They make very few concessions to popular taste and rarely succumb to passing fads. Over the years they have cultivated their own audience which, they can boast, is the most refined of all private theatre audiences.

Ten years of hard, honest work and strict artistic integrity have finally yielded their reward. *Point of View* was voted three years in succession Best Play of the Year by both the public and the critics, and their latest *In Plain Arabic* has recently won The Arab Thinkers' Club nomination for the Soad El-Sabbah $15,000 award for intellectual merit. Funny that a private-sector theatre company should prove more intellectually serious and daring than all the public-sector companies put together!

General Egyptian Book Organization Press

Deposit No: in Dar-El-Kutub 1993/8190

I.S.B.N. 977-01 - 3475- 9